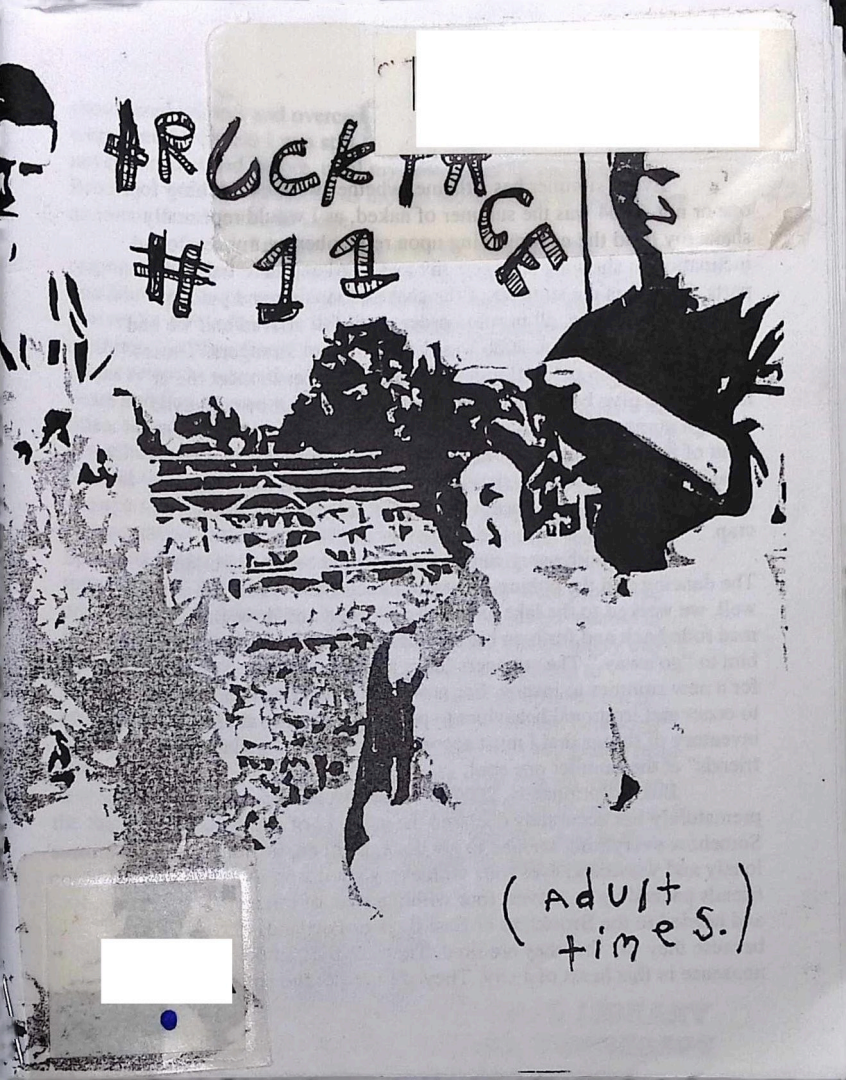

#11
(adult times.)

try

Every summer has a theme, whether we are searching for one or not. 2004 was the summer of naked, as I would repeatedly shake my head the next morning upon remembering my newfound inclination to showing strangers my awkward and inverted body parts. 2005 was the summer of the shakes. Dancing and puking, puking and dancing, all in some order, until fall arrived and we had to heal ourselves again. 2006 was the summer of strangers. Those train hopping pen pals, all jumping from car to car to meet me at my favorite dive bars, seeing the face that could not be conveyed through numerous letters and year old zines. And then they were in front of me, at my house, at my work—as I encouraged them to steal as much as possible, shoving belt buckles into their bags because they refused to accept the store's collection of useless crap.

Yet as with every summer, the themes tend to overlap. The dancing and the puking comes and goes and the strangers, well, we walked to the lake and they got naked and dove in as a man rode back and forth on his bicycle to ogle them until they told him to "go away." The strangers leave and I stay, waiting patiently for a new summer to inspire. For new unexplainable phenomenas to occur and irrational behaviors to persist. To staring at an inventory of things that I must accomplish that lists "make new friends" at the number one spot.

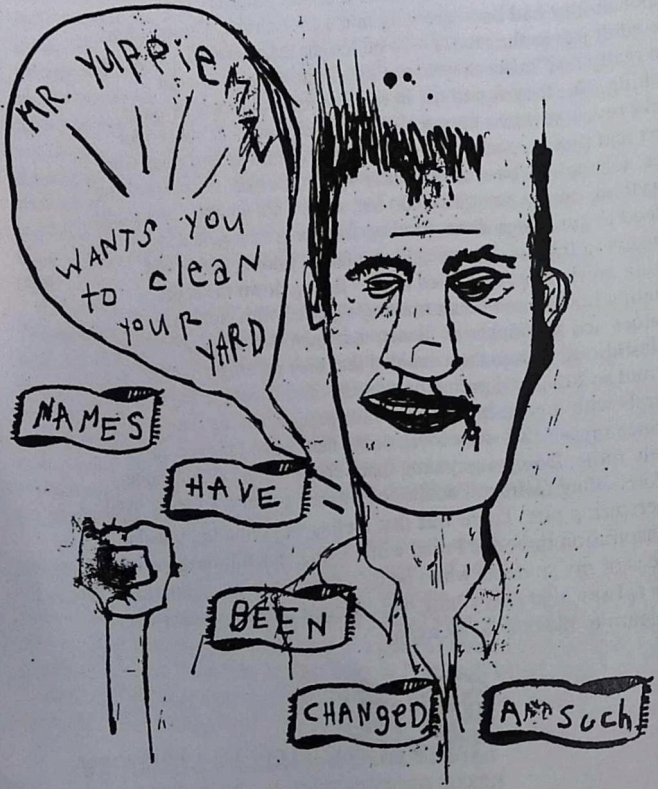
But, unfortunately, 2007 came and went, and it was prematurely but accurately declared the summer of adult. Somehow everything seemed to get done, be done, tiresome, lonely and warranted eyes rolls with every adult step. And so my friends packed up in droves, four within a span of three months, and headed to the Brooklyns or East Bays or Portlands of the world because they say that they are tired. They are tired of this drunken nonsense in this beast of a city. They are tired of the cold

shouldered winters and overcrowded parties. But most of all they were tired of the life I was still living and refused to give up. It never hurt that bad before, until my best friend up and left to Brooklyn with all the others, as though those moves to that city are an innate developmental stage.

To be fair I cannot blame it on the summer. The responsibility had been growing in me for months. Turned from one adult job to the next. Folks no longer asked me, "So what do you really do?" after they found me peddling food or used clothing. No, they found me in the prototypical jobs that aging punks revert to when they realize that their band has sucked for years and that no one reads zines anymore. Placed into roles with titles, scheduled showers and early wake up times. Accomplishing everything on my summer to do list, since I am an adult and adults pretend to get things done. Finding friends in strangers and strangers in friends. Learning instruments, joining bands and playing music that resembled bodies falling down the stairs. Spending hours upon hours making a garden with stubborn tomatoes and suicidal bean plants, that once they were producing and fastidiously eaten they decided that they no longer wanted to live.And so I dug and pulled out weeds, chased out the angry city squirrels with human hair and cayenne pepper, anything to convince myself that what I was doing here wasn't played out or entirely futile. Doing everything that I could while still balancing that foreboding feeling of adulthood lingering over my greasy head and perspiring pits. There was that feeling of giving up, but also new inspiration in books I read while being an adult librarian, or in the faces of my students while being a fake teacher. And in that summer, I saw that everything had changed but that somehow I could learn to make it all ok again.

again

But before there's summer there occurs an impenetrable winter, the season in which dark thoughts are born. Those thoughts that urge me to be purposefully reckless. But I am trying to reclaim that space, the desire to leave the house or call a friend. This thing called adulthood, I still believe we can fight it.



DIRECTIONS

My suggested teacher training program-----years of procrastination and grocery bagging-----get drunk; act a fool----lazily send in incomplete teaching application because you aren't really sure what else to do with yourself----become frustrated with bureaucracy and papers to fill out----become frustrated with job and know that it's time to do something else (finally)----impatiently send in the completed application a year early-----wait----sell more dirty clothes----show up to teacher orientation soaked and sockless-----interact with normal people for the first time in years-----roll eyes at the girl who advocates for vouchers-----sit in schools and take notes/make judgments on teachers(not to their knowledge)-----go to another school, walk through metal detectors, repeat----quit job----become afraid of actually standing in front of a class and being a real teacher----teach a lesson to classmates and have it bomb----think about getting Phd instead----notice I am acting way too uptight----get long overdue tetanus shot----make a lot of mistakes---take a summer job at the library since being rejected from teaching summer classes----stop going out, stay at home and write papers---evolve into more of a teacher assistant than shy observer---remember to laugh---get more student loans to buy more tattoos---field many questions from students about piercings and tattoos---learn you aren't much of a taskmaster or yeller---break up first fist fight in class----move onto another school, repeat---prepare myself for the final semester of student teaching---buy more sweater vests----go to bed at reasonable hour (for once)-----take shower.

observations_at school #one

"Are you queer? Are you queer? Are you queer? Are you queer?" is what the sixth grade boy sitting four feet away from me is whispering menacingly. "Are you queer? Are you queer?" with furrowed brow and words traveling to my observation seat at the teacher's desk. I keep my head down in my notebook and he continues the chanting. "Are you queer? Are you queer? Are you queer?" lip snarled and with such commotion and curiosity coming from a one hundred pound body. With each successive question my heart rate increases. The word sounding sharp, trouble making and unforgiving. (But isn't that why we call ourselves that?)He raises his hand and the teacher with long flowered skirt flows over to his side. "Teacher, what does queer mean?"

"Where did you hear that?" she almost chokes over her words. Coughs twice and nervously looks over in my direction. A Midwestern liberal college lanyard hangs on her neck. A son, a daughter, a nephew, there, in college with all the other kids who can afford it and still complain about being picked on in life. She doesn't want to say the wrong thing. She knows he is asking because I am sitting four feet away and my hair is short, breasts are hidden, shoes are polished and stolen.

"It was in *Harry Potter*. And I looked it up in the dictionary and it said it means homosexual. Is that right? Gay, right?" He shows his teeth in my direction.

"I doubt it was in *Harry Potter*." She unconsciously places her right hand on her breast.

"Yeah, yeah it was. It said a 'queer tree.' Why would that tree be a homosexual?" He scratches his scalp.

"No, no, that word can mean strange too or odd."

"But it says gay in the dictionary."

"Well, it doesn't always mean *that*." She starts to walk away towards the other tables, lined up, chairs that are not allowed to be tilted back. With the yelling of ineffective warnings that heads could be cracked open, brains splattered on the ground, with each tilting of the chair. But it never ever happens.

"Well, I thought it was weird, or I mean, yeah I thought it was queer." My eyes went back to the notebook, furiously writing down the notes, acting as though the scene was not in reference to my presence as a supposedly unseen observer. Listening to the math lesson, noting the pristine whiteness of the mandated Chicago Public School uniform. The white shirts and navy blue pants, the tufts of black hair on the boys' heads and the long black ponytails of the girls.

The smell of lunch enters the classroom when it is only nine am. Cooking preservative filled food, the dregs of once moving animals and vegetables fed to the students for free. Full of sugar and no nutrition to give them clogged pores and no attention spans. He sniffs in the air and turns back to me. "Mmm, smells like French fries today. I love French fries." He smiles and I look at him with caution.

"Me too," I say, breaking my vow of silence, slightly smiling and making my peace with the twelve year old, "Me too."

observations at school #two

Button up shirt with collar and requisite stripes. I must smell the armpits before making my daily decision, knowing full well that if the students smell it then I will not hear the end of it until graduation. I trudge through the slush and wait in line behind students who are shuffled in through metal detectors; but me with my white skin and collared shirt, get to walk up the stairs, never questioned for my ID, and nodded along to a room on the third floor to get my picture taken when they never even asked for my name. Around the attendance office there are signs posted, urging students to avoid teenage pregnancy because an early birth will doom them to a life of poverty. The signs posted in bold letters above the heads of the pregnant students signing out for a doctor's appointment, essentially telling them that they will never succeed, that society and the school won't support them and their decision over their body. Dooming them with the signs when they were only given the government mandated abstinence only sex education, telling the kids no sex before marriage, because if you have sex before marriage it will damage your mental state. This is what the government demands that you say instead of providing information about contraceptives, sexual agency and healthy relationships in order to address issues of teenage sexuality. This is what those bold signs do not say.

In homeroom I watch a proud young mother showing her friends her recent ultra sound photo. They all giggle together and ooh and ahh at the three photos of the growth inside of her belly. Huddled over a desk until more girls congregate, joining in the commotion,

alternating between Spanish and English, sharing their own photos over the drone of the school announcements.

And one of these laughing girls truly inspires me. She's the first openly transgender student I have come across at CPS. She always corrects the teacher for using the wrong pronouns while the teacher stands in front of the class like a deer in headlights. The teacher not knowing what to do or say, just in her head probably asking herself why do they have to make this so difficult for me?

But she is fierce, her new name tattooed illegally on her lower back in cursive, nails painted and lengthy, hair waving from shoulder to shoulder, styles gelled and moussed, as she moves to the sound of her words. "Yah, lemme see that, lemme see that closer," she demands, the nails grasping the five by seven photos, holding them up to her face and biting her glossy lips. "Uh uh, no that ain't a boy at all!" All the other girls are stunned at her accusation. "No that ain't a dick. That's a big ass clit! Right there, that's a big ass motherfucking clit!" Her purple nails pointing to the bodily protrusion on the sheet as her friends groan and laugh in unison. I smirked, I couldn't help it. How can you be immune to such talk?

NON-ADULT TIMES

Cleveland was angry that day my friends. Like a fist full of alcohol soaked toilet paper thrown from one end of the bar to the next with giggles and shouts as the only form of retaliation.

"You would be angry too if your dad was a pissed off steel worker that came home to beat the crap outta you every day. That's why all these kids are violent and that's why I gotta leave this place," An old acquaintance informed me seconds after ducking from another fireball of Charmin and Bacardi Limon. At two bucks a drink the patrons can afford to use their gin and tonics as weapons against an unnamed enemy.

And at that moment it wasn't just the flaming toilet paper rolls or the aggressive bodies that piled in front of the stage to hear my friends play songs, or the man outside who opened his pants to smash his exposed penis against the glass of the bar for all onlookers to see. Nor was it the shit stained bathrooms with toilets already filled with puke even before I started my first drink. No it was the electricity in the air, the undercurrent of animosity towards a world that has done them wrong, somehow some way. The feeling of entitlement that these young white men with burning toilet paper in their hands felt when tossing them at coiffed hair and leather purses. The anger at being the butt of jokes and tired of having their life choices constantly questioned by outsiders.

But besides those ornery bar patrons, Cleveland didn't actually seem angry at all. Apartments were readily supplied for us and our caravan composed of band members, shiftless friends and one silent girlfriend. We were taken to a fancy apartment building with historical flair, which would have for sure been knocked down years ago in Chicago to build a pink bricked condominium identical to the ones next door and down the block.

Parking illegally to shuffle our things upstairs and enter a room filled with weed smoke, furry dogs, sad songs and smiling faces. All the tenants telling us their plans to leave the city and region, all of them, like clock work, feeling the urge to leave their homes and the fancy apartment building with a regal sounding name. The hosts even offered us the empty apartment next door to carry on with our festivities. It hadn't been occupied for months and all of us rag tag bodies couldn't fit on the floor next to the dogs that rivaled our body types. We took our thirty pack and smokes to the pristine and empty apartment, with the radiator already working over time that every window needed to be opened to stop us from sweating.

We fell asleep, bodies piled on top of each other in various stages of undress, mouths draped open to catch flies and only my ears were woken up to the hear a man jangling keys and a woman in a white wool coat sighing behind him.

"Oh I'm sorry I didn't know someone had moved in here," he said to me as I looked up in my man panties that were a shade of grey as Lucas laid next to me, shirtless and in his whitey tighties that could no longer be honestly referred to as white.

"Ummm, yeah," was all I could force out. He closed the door quickly, with the woman's look of horror lingering in the background. I got up and alarmed the troops, finding girlfriend and boyfriend in the empty master bedroom, naked under a blanket from a night of sex that thankfully didn't wake us up. Get up, get up, we gotta get outta here. Everyone dismissed my demands, not hearing the door open, thinking that my constant heightened state of paranoia had finally taken over my mind and that I had made up the whole interaction with the maintenance man. Throwing on my pants and the naked couple still wouldn't budge. Tossing a used bottle cap out the window, our impromptu ashtray for the night, that overflowed with cigarette butts spilling onto the new marble countertop. Wake up wake up, this is no joke. Opening the

windows even farther to get my first breaths of air after hours of inhaling radiator steam and the fresh coat of beige paint. Still everyone else was slow to move but I decided to make sure that we had a plan of escape. I opened up the door and the maintenance man and potential tenant stood, waiting for me.

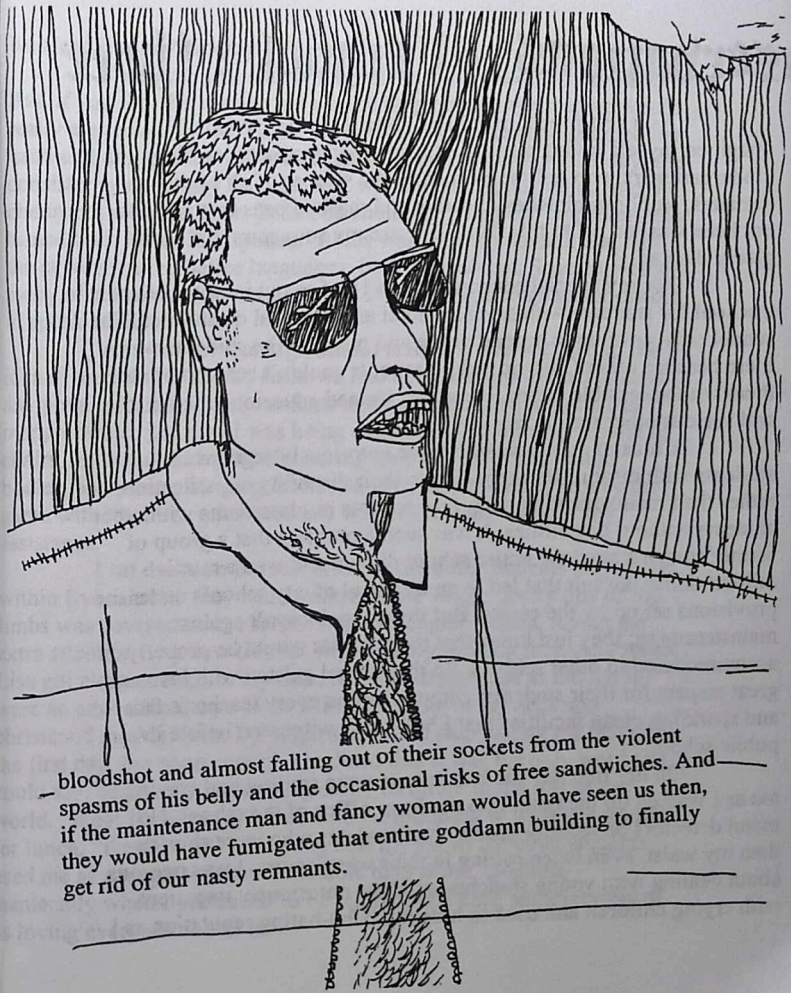
"So, did Michael give you the keys then?" he asked, piecing together the nasty bodies on the floor, sleeping on towels and winter coats.

"Well, uhh," I tried to delay, but the years have made me a terrible liar. One would assume the opposite but I no longer could look into people's eyes without my nose twitching in embarrassment. "Well, uhh no, not uhh really. Our friends let us stay here. We're from out of town."

"You aren't supposed to do that you know." He had become stern and the woman looked at me with disgust, either due to my life goals or having seen me in my fruit of the looms.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. We'll be out of here in a second." I closed the door and knew that that woman would sure as hell not be renting this apartment that had been soiled by the naked asses, cigarette butts, spilled beer and pheromones of some fucked up kids trying to relive their adolescent mischief.

They walked down the hallway and then everyone else decided to believe me and my sense of urgency. We got out of the building unscathed. No tickets on the conversion van and were directed towards a shop where we would be guaranteed free sandwiches. All was well as we headed out of Cleveland and back onto route 80 towards New York. All was well until I felt as though I was going to wet my pants and I convinced the guys to find a gas station off the highway thoroughfare before I peed and pooed on the back seat because the coffee and sandwiches had kicked in as they always do. I ran into the bathroom and was saved, only to open the door and find my friend puking out the free sandwich. A river of bright orange flooding the snow covered lawn. His eyes were



bloodshot and almost falling out of their sockets from the violent spasms of his belly and the occasional risks of free sandwiches. And if the maintenance man and fancy woman would have seen us then, they would have fumigated that entire goddamn building to finally get rid of our nasty remnants.

bservations at school # three

As a self-proclaimed baby hater, I would have never imagined myself loving a group of twelve kindergarteners. Tiny kindergarteners who left their drool on the sleeves of all of my sweaters, stubborn blotches of saliva and mashed peas that still has not been washed off to this day. They are my souvenirs that I will gladly display.

For my special education class I had to put in thirty hours at a school for students with severe mental and physical disabilities. The school only went up to second grade and many of the students were there because other Chicago public schools couldn't accommodate them with accessible ramps, elevators, trained educators, therapists and various other resources.

Chicago public schools have notoriously segregated students with disabilities according to their disability classification, rather than mainstreaming them into schools or classrooms with other students without disabilities. It was such a problem that a group of former students sued the entire school district and won a mutli-million dollar lawsuit that led to an overhaul of city schools under the provisions set up by the courts. But this school wasn't against mainstreaming; they just knew that the students would be properly accommodated in other schools. So this school existed with love and great respect for their students, compassion on every teacher's face and sparkling clean facilities that I had never witnessed before in a public school.

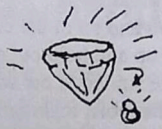
On my first day the bus drivers were smiling and waving at me as I walked up the ramp into the front office of the school. No metal detectors or security guards, just students who were shorter than my waist, even when rolling in their wheelchairs. I was nervous about dealing with young students, as I was notoriously impatient with crying children and tried to hide my baby-hating reputation as I

was lead into my kindergarten classroom.

"You can just observe and sit in the corner if you'd like. But, if you feel the need to get up and help out at any time, we would really appreciate it," Ms. Laurie smiled at me while Izzie grabbed her hand and dragged her around the table, making laps day after day, the consistency necessary for a student with autism. Julius rolled into the classroom with his Bears jacket on shouting, "Yippee!" and everyone turned their heads in response. Julius was the only student that had the capacity to verbalize languages, both English and Spanish, while many of the other students were still learning sign language or unable to speak at all.

As a pre-service high school teacher I was not used to the idea of touching students, since we had been harshly warned against any physical contact with students that could be misinterpreted as inappropriate. But now I was being encouraged to lift students out of chairs, let them tackle me, clobbering me with their fifty pound bodies, and some swinging immobile body parts in order to play the game with the three other students who could walk without any assistance.

I sat down on the carpet while the other students played and within five minutes they had swallowed me whole. Every one of my limbs was covered with a screaming and laughing child, loving the extra attention by a new teacher with a funny looking face. And when Lisa got close enough to my face, she'd grab my nose as though it were an educational toy, while Miracles clung to my neck and christened me Ms. Ikea. I thought she would stop calling me that after the first day, but soon enough I realized that it was the only word she could say, constantly advertising shitty furniture to the rest of the world. "Ikea! Ikeeeeeeya," even when responding to what she wanted for lunch. "Ikea! Ikea!" screaming into my ear as the other students used me as a target to throw inflatable toys at me, laughing maniacally when I pretended to be injured, and each and everyone of us loving every second of it.



It made me jump the first time I heard it. A guttural roar from a surprising source. Ms. Marta laughed at me, "Oh yeah, I was about as shocked the first time I heard it too."

"Where did it come from?"

"We don't really know. It's just Diamond's duck voice." This deep scolding, raspy Donald duck voice was coming from a forty pound kindergartener. Diamond. A child who had just recently started school after spending years shipped to caretaker to friend to locked closet. Her parents didn't know what to do with her because legally a child with fetal alcohol syndrome cannot receive special education services until they are five. So she was ignored for so many years, creating her own loud and threatening duck voice language for her protection.

"Drrrrz drrrrz kaaarak kaaarakk ravvv rawa."

"Wait, wait, what was that Diamond?" and repeat. Indecipherable to anyone except herself. The school had no idea what to do with her aggression, her voice that scared the other students, and her tendency to hit them in the face. They placed Diamond with the preschool class for a few weeks, hoping her Donald Duck voice would cease and the hitting would end. That she would be able to show compassion to others and attempt to speak in a non animal influenced dialect. She didn't hurt them at all, but she also didn't stop talking like a duck.

For the teachers she presented a new challenge, or even a new nightmare. But for me she was amazing, grabbing a hold of my sleeve a few seconds after meeting me, always demanding my attention for special projects, sharing her pepitos with me, trying to

stuff food into my mouth and patting me on the head for speaking to her in Spanish, or at least attempting. Always the first student to march right into the class, so proud in her bright pink jacket with this self-sufficient confidence seen in her focused brown eyes. As soon as she spotted me she would stare at her shoes and politely respond "yeshhhh" when I asked her if she was hungry for breakfast. Always the first one to finish eating in order to run over to the carpet and find toys to destroy. Clapping to herself, singing and dancing, acting as the king of the carpet when the other students roll on by with their wheelchairs. As soon as they jump out of the chairs she crawls in them, rolling around imitating the kids and the teachers, along with the animals.

Coming to school with a diaper full of excrement, stinking up the classroom but always walking up to another girl and smelling her dirty butt without their permission, looking at me, while pointing at the girl and yelling "Prreeeee Kroooo!" But it was always her with the stink, waiting for Ms. Marta to drag her to the bathroom for a change. She never wasted anytime in the class, even with the uncomfortable waste shifting around in her pants. Shaking her tiny index finger in my face, she grabbed a drum, forced a tambourine into my hand, gave me incomprehensible directions, and started our band. Screaming in her duck voice while we banged away until the rest of the class joined us with bells, triangles, wooden blocks and laughs to the great annoyance of Ms. Teresa and Ms. Marta. Pounding and screaming away until the two teachers finally got a powerful whiff of Diamond's diaper, and put a stop to the most amazing band ever to be formed in the history of time, for a much needed diaper change.

"Nice Tupac pants Terrrence." The deceased rap star's face was plastered across his left leg, sulking.

"Yeah, yeah," nodding his head in unison with his deep voice.

"You like Tupac a lot?"

"Yeah, yeah." It is one of the only words he can verbalize, but otherwise he understands everything I say to him. I talk to him about the Bears "Yeah, yeah," with a smile and then mention the Ninja Turtles, "Yeah, yeah." Always nicely dressed unless he has an accident with his diaper and is relegated to wearing cut off sweat pants with a stretched out waist band. So he drags his legs around, wearing medical Superman calf braces up to his knees, doubled with Spiderman socks that don't get dragged to the ground when his sweatpants do. "Yeah, yeah!" laughing as his diaper is exposed and I have to pull his pants back up over and over again as he plays.

"Teeeerrrrrence, stop doing that! Why can't he wear his pants Ms. Loren?" Julius complains to me, afraid that the affection I show to Terrence will interfere with his budding relationship with me.

Terrence looks at Julius and smiles, looking for his friendship with the only other mobile boy in the classroom. The third boy, Ian, is relegated to lying on his stomach, coughing out phlegm the entire day into a paper towel. His body paralyzed from the neck down since birth and his mother still wheels him into the classroom as though she were afraid of him. Ian's mother slams on the wheelchair break and runs out of the door as Ya Ya walks up near him and verbalizes her own form of hello to him that his eyes indicate some form of understanding.

Most days Ian has to lie on his stomach over a pile of paper towels, spewing mucus from an esophagus he has no control over. He

has had a cold for weeks and it's the only way we can get the snot out of him without causing him to choke. Ms. Marta pats his back and Diamond scrunches her nose in disgust at the particularly large and long collections of snot. And at lunchtime Ms. Laurie moves Ian out of our view, his back to us, legs pointing straight out across the body board, as the kids happily munch on their fries or are fed mashed potatoes.

Terrence pulls out his voice box and turns it on. His food menu already on the main screen, as he only really demands our understanding when discussing food. "MILK……CHOCOLATE" the monotone voice inside the box says after he pressed the pictures in succession.

"Oh, so you want chocolate milk Terrence? You always want chocolate milk," I joke as I place Diamond's tray of food in front of her.

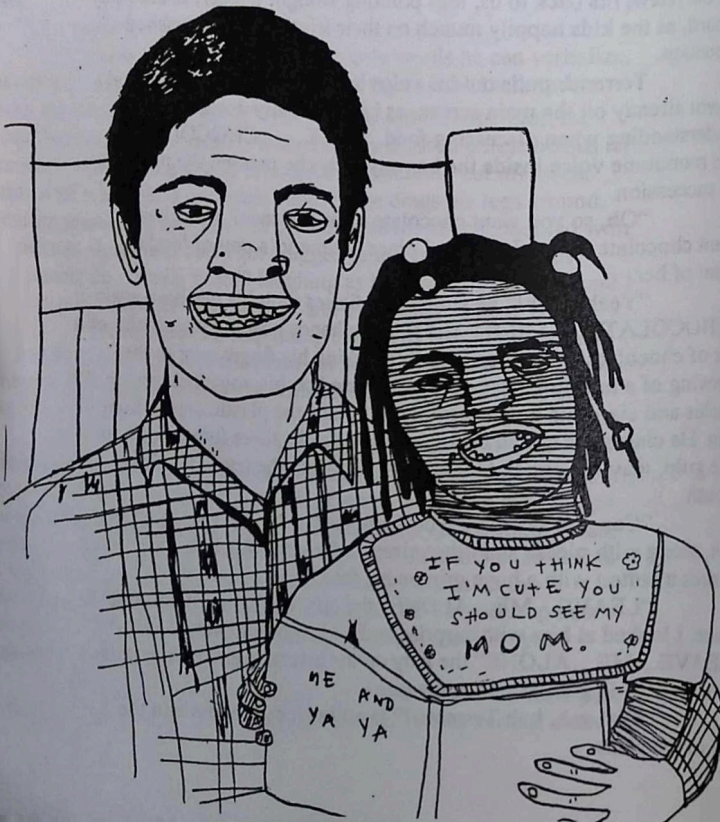
"Yeah, yeah!" he smiles and fusses with his machine again, "CHOCOLATE…..MILK." His shaking hands pushing the picture of a bar of chocolate only seconds before jerking his finger over to the drawing of a half full glass of milk depicted on his voice box screen. He smiles and claps his hands together as I place the plastic cup in front of him. He clasps the cup in both hands and drinks three fourths of it in one gulp, leaving a line of milk dribbling down the left side of his mouth.

"Can you say thank you Terrence?" I see the phrase on his box, along with please and other niceties. He grabs his box and pushes a button with a huge grin on his face.

"LEAVE…ME…ALONE" the box says in her monotone voice. I looked at him with surprise and he laughs and laughs, "LEAVE…ME…ALONE" the lady on the box says and all the kids have erupted in giggles and applause.

"Oh yeah, huh Terrence?" Is all I can say to him and the rest of the class.

"LEAVE...ME...ALONE." He pushes it again and we are both carrying the same coy smile consisting of sarcasm and occasional bitterness. He picks up his chocolate milk for another sip and I am happy that some specialist has programmed a voice box with some major badditude.



Ya Ya is the real bully of the class. Hands down. No questions about it. Though for a while I through it was a two person job shared with Diamond. But, no it's Ya Ya, who stands at least a foot above the rest, simultaneously giving out hugs and slaps at the same time. Stumbling into class with legs wobbly, heading in opposite directions, as a teacher helper brings her wheelchair up behind her. Her face possessing that mischievous grin to expose her broken palate in her mouth, the missing teeth, and gorgeous smile.

Ya Ya was born with the two sides of her brain disconnected from each other, and to see her laugh, clap, walk, hug, and smile it seems as though she has accomplished more in her life than most people I know.

Everyday wearing a new bib that will give us a clue as to how she would act that day. If her bib read, "high maintenance," then she would be riled up and unable to remain in her chair. If her bib read, "If you think I'm cute you should see my mommy," then she would be riled up and unable to sit down. If her bib read, "Best kid alive," then she would be riled up as well. In reality the only thing they changed was the conversations we held with Ya Ya as she finished up eating her breakfast, corn pops all over the table and her lap, while watching the other children play and yelling towards them in order to still be included. And only until after she has finished all her food, cleaned up her lap, wiped down her bib and settled her over into her chair, could circle time begin and my transformation in a singing, clapping fool would be complete.

"Who is here today? Who is here today? Everybody clap your hands who is here today?" was our song everyday, sixteen times a day. Only Julius singing the words, Diamond quacking, Ya Ya screaming, Lisa humming, and Terrence clapping with the rhythm, while Miracles and Izzie occupied themselves with toys or staring, and Ian was once again relegated to lying on his belly. The teachers pulling much of the singing duty, though our voices were

occasionally interrupted to chastise Diamond for getting out of her seat and quacking at another student for not paying attention. Ms. Laurie holding photos of all the students in class so everyone could point to identify each other. Counting to thirty one, fixing the calendar, learning about the weather conditions, reading a book about one of the twenty six letters, and then listening to a song about the same letter, with singing optional and head bobbing to the beat required.

On most days gym would be the next class. The kids using equipment to roll around the cafeteria, those that could walk would climb on inflatable toys, and Ya Ya, though usually so harsh with the rest of the class, would spend her time with Ian, touching his face, patting his hand, pushing him in his wheelchair around the cafeteria when most of the time he's left out of all the activities because of seizures, colds, vomiting and other health scares.

But today we had a special assembly and the students were excited to march themselves back into that cafeteria to watch the student-led African-American heritage day performance. Students from the other classes were draped in robes and singing along to tapes of songs about African pride. Diamond and Ya Ya both nodding their heads and smiling at the sound of any type of music. Teachers read the stories of African fables and the students acted it out, until one of them would look out into the crowd, see the hundreds of eyes and break out sobbing in stage fright. We all clapped to support the boy who was crying in the middle of the stage, his trachea tube bobbing up and down with each violent cry, until finally his mother came on stage and carried him out of the proceedings.

Diamond crawled on my lap to get a better view, fussing with her fingers, but the attention that I was giving her made Ya Ya

jealous. Ya Ya's long arms started wrapping around Diamond's frame attempting to drag her back onto the hard cafeteria floor. Though Ya Ya is used to being a bully of all the other students, except Ian, of course, she had met her match with Diamond, the other ask no questions slapper in the class. Ya Ya and Diamond began to hit each other with Diamond uttering "No no no" and I put up my hand to stop it, telling Ya Ya to sit back down and Diamond to behave. Soon enough the songs start again and the two kids are happy. Best friends again until something gets in their way. Diamond even crawls off my lap to sit on the same level as Ya Ya, smiling and laughing at each other until Diamond pulls in close and licks Ya Ya's mouth.

"Diamond, no!" a long line of spit shared between the two until Diamond rears her head around, laughing like the drunkest Santa Claus alive. "Hurrrrh hurrrh hurrh." A deep rasping voice emitting from a six year old child that could be mistaken as coming from a seventy-year-old lung cancer survivor. Ya Ya looks at me too, and we all share in Diamond's old man laughter.

All bundled up with no where to go. Every student seems to own an abominable snow suit that takes about a half an hour each to put on. And then we had every layer covered, every student in their necessary chair, waiting for the busses to arrive. There sat Terrence, falling asleep so easily after an easy meal. Not even my singing could wake him as he drowsily smiled in my direction. Ms. Laurie left and I was face to face with the twelve kindergarteners, having to entertain the students by acting like a complete fool as they clapped along to my songs about washing machines washing me.

Only Ya Ya was not impressed, she got up out of her seat and tried to drag me off the stage by pulling on my hand. When I wouldn't abide by her commands she stubbornly turned her chair around, her back to my singing and dancing, while her eyes focused on the ticking of the clock. But the buses arrive one by one, each student wheeled out or led by the hand of an assistant teacher. Until only Julius and Ya Ya are in the room, impatiently staring at the walls. Julius waves his hand at me, indicating that he wants me to come in close so he can tell me a secret. He wraps his hands around his mouth and whispers into my ear, "Do you have a boyfriend?" I pull away quickly, shocked at the five-year-old's bluntness.

"Uhhh, no, and Julius, why are you asking that?"

"Yes, yes you do," he says as if he has done some research into my background.

"Oh yeah, how would you know?" I respond, challenging his assumptions about his ideas of only girls and boys doing things together.

"Because it's me! I'm your boyfriend!" He raises his hand in excitement and I walk away, embarrassed and charmed by this tiny five-year-old waiting to be lifted home.

But I wasn't too wooed, since the next week Julius confessed that he didn't even know my name, and then the week after that he forgot it, again.

It was a very very bad day, even though it began as it always did. Diamond marched in with her pink coat and triple pig tails, staring straight at the ground as I helped her take off her coat. And Ya Ya came in last as usual, stomping past the threshold with her wheel chair following the determined path.

Terrence came in a close second, his legs straight out in front of him as a friendly ramming device on his wheel chair. I helped him remove his Chicago Bears coat, lifted him out of his chair and set his place at the table. But something was different about him today. His eyes were droopy and every time I asked him how he was doing, he pouted out his lower lip and ran his index finger down his cheek.

"You're sad? Why are you sad?" I repeatedly asked, but we had not yet developed a mutual language to communicate. I had to watch him eat his breakfast to investigate. His arm shaking while grabbing his spoon and ramming it into the plastic corn pops container. And then every once in a while that same arm would jerk out, spilling his juice, his refilled juice, his food and then his water. It became apparent that he was having spasms in his arms, losing control of the appendages that got him around the classroom, wheeled him around the city.

He placed his hands on his lap and stopped eating the food that he loved so much. I took him over to the carpet to play to try and cheer him up. As usual Julius wanted to play ball with me, tossing back and forth a beach ball until another student claimed it as their toy. I invited Terrence in on the festivities, his arm jerking to the side, throwing the ball in all the wrong directions without any control.

"Ms. Loren I don't wanna play with Terrence anymore. He keeps doing that and ruining the game!" Julius complained to me.

The continued and unnecessary animosity brewing between them. Terrence looked down at his lap, but I wouldn't let him quit. I told Julius to behave and we tried to continue the game. Terrence's arm consistently jerking, tossing the ball across the room away from the boundaries of the play carpet.

But it wasn't only Terrence that was in bad shape that day; Lisa was too. She rolled into class covered in pink blankets and Barbie backpack. Her long black hair pulled into a ponytail by one of her brothers, appearing the same as always except for her face. Today she didn't smile, remaining indifferent to every joke, every comment about her proper appearance that usually generated a huge grin. She didn't want to eat. She didn't want to get out of her chair. She sat sullen, watching over us as the other kids played on the rug before circle time.

Even with the sadness from two of the most outgoing students, the day did still not appear to be heading in the wrong direction. We were scheduled to have a special assembly. A local musician would be playing children's songs and everyone in the class loved to sing and clap along. We rolled the kids into the cafeteria, Terrence sitting sullen while Lisa began to cheer up. The kids were clapping and smiling, Ya Ya even got up and started dancing. But Terrence would not move. I grabbed his hands and danced in front of him but he just kept on shaking his head to say no, no he was too sad today to participate. Too sad from realizing that he was losing control of one of his arms after he has lived five years without the use of his legs. He pouted his lips out and stared at the ground, unable to talk about his problems, not having a square on his talk box to represent depression. He just sat, wondering what was happening to his arm.

The assembly ended and Diamond was really riled up. She was screaming "zapatos locos zapatos locos" over and over again since the musician had sang a song about crazy shoes, translating the song into Spanish as well. Diamond grabbed two books off the table

during reading time, placed them on top of her feet and started kicking like crazy, shouting "Zapatos locos! Zapatos locos!" with the duck voice accent as well. She would not sit still. Terrence remained set in his mind and Lisa looked over books, smiling occasionally. Julius rolled his eyes at Diamond and yelled at her in Spanish but she kept on pretending that the books were crazy shoes, the kind of magical accessory that could make an entire human being shake. Throwing books at me, on the ground, at the other students, "Zapatos locos! Zapatos locos!" screaming screaming, quaking, screaming, all of our attention on her.

Lisa watched silently, and over time her face began to look pale. She started waving her hands in front of her face, tears welling up in her eyes, as all we could do is ask, "What's wrong? What's wrong?" over and over again. She grabbed her voice box and started searching for the words to tell us, while the tears began to pour out of her eyes. Diamond stopped screaming; she sat in her seat and watched as all four of the teachers attended to a pale and frightened Lisa. We didn't know what was wrong and there was no way to find out until she started shaking and heaving, spitting up vomit all over her pink shirt, her voice now present, retching and moaning.

We lifted her up from the table and sat her on the ground. Ms. Marta held her head up so she wouldn't throw up on her herself anymore. Crying and puking and we never knew what to do, while Terrence still sat brooding, fearful of any new problems that might afflict him.

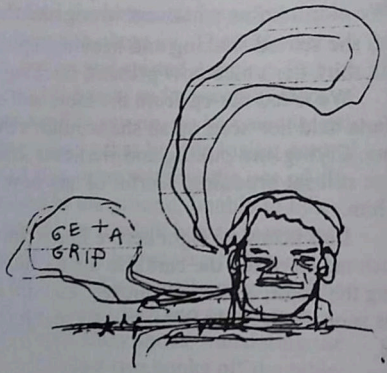
Lisa threw up right before lunch time. Two seconds before the lunch ladies rolled the cart into the room. The kids sat, silently, smelling the vomit and fried chicken, as I did my best to clean up the table as soon as possible, set it and try and have the class back to normal.

The other teachers tended to Lisa in a corner, still vomiting over a pile of paper towels, while I tried to talk to the kids. But they saw right through me. My jokes fell flat and every one of them was in their own world, thinking about Lisa. Julius saw me staring at the table having difficulty speaking.

"Are you crying?" he asked me in front of the others.

"No Julius, why would you ask that?"

"Because you look sad. You look really sad." He stuffed a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. "Don't worry, Lisa will be ok. We all know she will feel better." He smiled at me I forced one out for him as well, happy to be receiving solid advice from a boy who was twenty-one years younger than me.



At all costs I try to avoid saying goodbye. Others may interpret it as being heartless, but it's just my own way to deal with the loss. Otherwise I would be standing around, staring at my feet, kicking at the ground, making up scenarios in which I would see my students again, but knowing that it would never happen. So I usually sneak out quietly, move onto another school to meet a new group of students that I will think about constantly and get to know their catchphrases or quirks.

But with my kindergarteners they didn't want to let me go. Most of the kids grabbing a limb to say goodbye. Julius the only one able to say, "Please please come back soon," while Diamond stared at me from her nap mat. I put on my coat to walk out the door and she held out her hand. I put mine out and she grabbed it, shaking it over and over again like old time business partners.

"Brrryyyeee Msssh. Waaarreen" she finally said. Looking up to see Julius, Terrence, Lisa and Miracles all waving, delaying their mandated nap to say their goodbye. Hoping that it would not be the final time we saw each other, but deep down knowing that it would. (I miss them so much.)

MOUNTAIN TIME

Somehow I found myself two stepping with Kevin. Under the disco ball. That is in the shape of cowboy boots. My shoulders almost a foot above his, as we glide along on the dance floor, switching off leads and never once thinking that I would be dancing to country in the gay cowboy bar in Denver.

They acted as though it was a novelty, some amazing trait of their oxygen deprived metropolis, but I broke them the news that, this here gay cowboy bar is a chain and that I went to it in Chicago. But in Chicago it was empty and there were drag queens passing out free shots. And this here place was empty too with one of the dance floors playing country music and the other blasting industrial beats amongst leather straps hanging from the ceiling. The room seemed to have a gathering of heteros or semi-unattractive women hovering over their homosexual coworkers.

My feet were stuttering on a wooden dance floor, while being watched by these new group of friends who were just seconds ago strangers. United through games of pool, drinking since five pm, all day sunburned bike rides, and greasy bar food. Happy to be holding this very short short and queer man as we navigate our awkward bodies together to a Garth Brooks tune, stepping on the toes of one another through this drunken mess of a night. I smile and they all exclaim, "It must be the altitude!" because they have repeatedly accused me of being a life hating Chicagoan with bitterness pumping out of my very heart. "Look, look she's having fun, it must be the altitude that makes her happy," they deduce, instead of realizing that my grins are coming from the beer and the free twenty dollars nestled in my wallet that someone had forgotten in the ATM. Our new

straight friend from Alabama looks on, wondering how he ended up with all of us crazy queers when all he wanted to do was sell his music magazine at the zine fest.

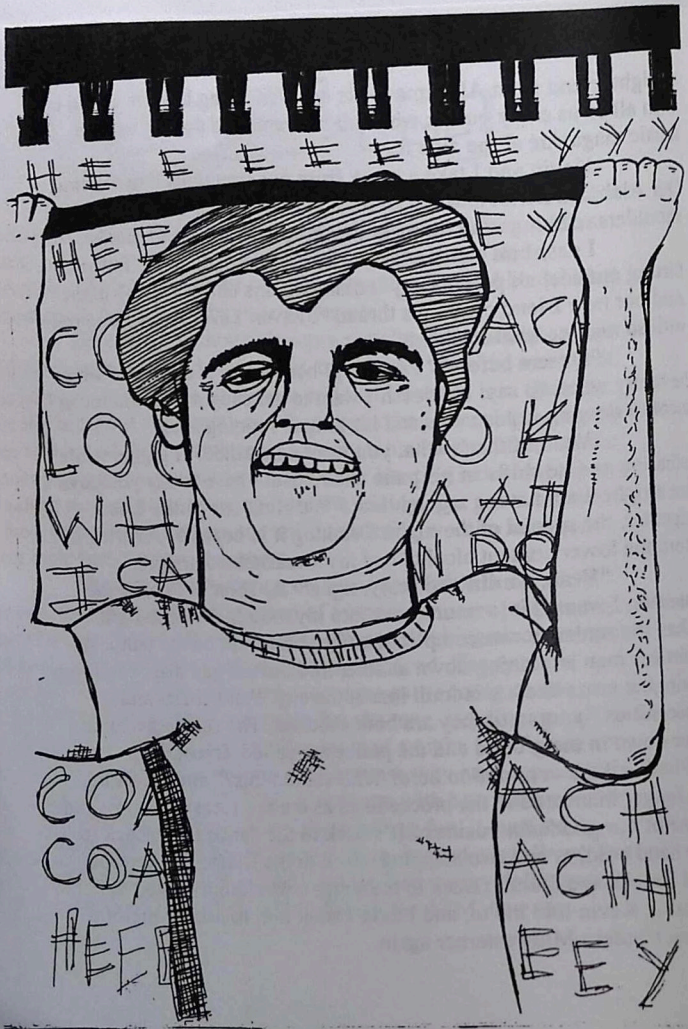
Kevin and I take a break from our strenuous line dancing. Our Alabama friend and I head outside to smoke in the thin air. His shoulders relaxing after hours of inappropriate jokes and touches.

I pass him a cigarette and he looks around at the few men flirting outside, all pretty sorry looking on this chilly Sunday night. And our new friend clears his throat, "I haven't ever really hung out with so many…uhhh…uhhhh…"

"Queers before?" I interrupt because he is unsure of what he really wants to say. He doesn't want to get caught with too much alcohol flowing in his veins and his tongue running loose.

"Yeah, if that's what you wanna be called." I giggle while exhaling and he shifts in his patio chair. "But I have to say you guys are alright. I am having a good time." We clink our Miller Lite's together, the special of the night. Drinking it in hopes of sobering up from the lower content alcohol and my sweatstained armpits.

"Yeah, we ain't so scary, right?" As soon as I posed the question I wanted it to return back into my mouth. Because right when the sentence was completed a fight broke out on the patio. A shirtless man is running down another mid thirties gay man, shouting, swinging arms like a windmill lost in the city. Patio chairs and obscenities flying until they are both subdued. The shirtless man is face down in the ground and the police are called, screaming, "What's all the commotion here? Who started this?" and we shrug, no longer interested in the proceedings as the red faces are angry and none of our goddamn business. It's back to the dance floor, back to the hand holding and two stepping. Back to the Carrie Underwood and Brooks and Dunne. Back to the songs I would only listen to because Kevin told me to, and I didn't want him to accuse me of being a bittern Midwesterner again.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observations at school # four

"Didn't your teacher ever teach you who to behave in a theeeaterrrr?" the certified teacher sitting in the row ahead of us declared in a non-theater voice to one of my new students. It wasn't so much of a question but more as a challenge to the students, as their mouths dropped and their faces turned towards me.

"What, she ain't even think you a teacher! Ain't you gonna say something?" my hands are pushing down air, trying to calm them down without making a scene. "You want me to take care of her then?" she whispers back to me and I just hold my finger up to my lips, mouthing the words we'll talk about this later to her inquisitive eyes.

The play was boring and my students and I knew it. But they weren't being loud, someone accidentally snapped their gum and looked embarrassed before the teacher ahead of us reprimanded them. It seemed unnecessary and frankly none of her business to start criticizing someone else's students. And I sat there in a semi-fancy sweater, maybe she knew I was there as a teacher assistant, and maybe really, the joke was on me. That I was a bad teacher that allowed gum to be snapped and had neglected to incorporate bourgeoisie behavior into my students' lives. It was just my first day and I still didn't know what I was doing, or really how to be a teacher. I was racking up mistakes left and right, and I didn't even realize it.

The curtain finally fell for intermission and we are ready to discuss. The students' heads immediately turned to me

"She's racist! That teacher she's racist. She told us to be quiet because we're Puerto Rican. It's like that everywhere. At the movies, everyone telling us to be quiet because they hate Puerto Ricans!"

"Guys, I know it's not fair, but let's just stay quiet for the rest of the play. We can talk about it more on the bus ride home. I know you weren't being loud."

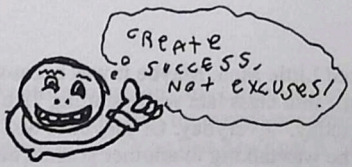
"And she had those two students of hers sucking face over there. Passing on the herpes from their mouth to mouth and she's telling us to behave! We didn't do nothing!"

"Wait someone was making out in her class?"

"Yeah, yeah, those two students over there." She pointed to a young couple sitting at the end of the row and their faces reddened. "They're nasty. She needs to yell at them, take care of *her* class, not us."

"I know, I know, but let's calm down and try and get through the rest of the show. Just don't say anything to her, ok?" I didn't even have these students' names memorized yet and they put me in the position of chaperone. But they looked at me as someone with authority when I still felt as though I had none. Not recognizing my role as a teacher, still unsure of my boundaries, my place to tell the kids to quiet down and settle in. Not wanting to be like everyone else who tells them to stay quiet, who in turn also tells me to be quiet. Always the folks who already have the power to tell those who are loud, our voices trying to take up space that is not easily given to us, and then as always we are told that we are loud and obnoxious. Our voices, fighting for that space and those who control it tell us to be quiet, to shut up or leave.

The students sighed and complied, arms crossed and pouting in the theater through the final act. The supervising teacher had us exit first, hoping to avoid anymore conflict between the students and the teacher in front of us. We stand in the front lobby, watching the spring rain out pound against the windows. Waiting and waiting for our bus, but of course it comes last. And all the students from the wealthier schools, that had the best seats in the front rows, glare at us on the way out.



Being an observer is like learning to hold your tongue. To sit in a chair with a stoic face, pretending that the teacher you are watching is always doing an excellent job. Spending every day harshly judging people until you are up in front of the classroom this time. Alone. Thirty eyes staring at you and then you stumble over words, reciting the directions at a speed of a mile a minute, and all the students must ask you to repeat it again, scratching their heads. And then you wonder how these teachers that you have judged--criticized for not sharing your same philosophy--you wonder how they can do this every day, so so easily. And having to remind yourself that people who become teachers do generally care about kids, but maybe you aren't seeing it all, maybe you are being an over-critical jerk and who knows if you could even succeed up there on your own.

Following the rules of someone else, in a classroom that is not your own, even when you know that you would be doing things completely differently. But you comply, smile, hide the rolling of the eyes and learn not to say anything since teaching styles are so personal, so hotly contested. It is trying to be humble when the mentor teacher places an obnoxious clipart picture of a smiling m&m on the top of your worksheet and all the students make fun of you for it. It is like trying to keep your mouth shut, trying to see other methods, trying to convince yourself that you don't know *everything*, trying to justify yourself and wondering who is actually doing it right, and never receiving a solid answer.

I never liked Little Man. Maybe it was because he always swore so loud or came into class late while stating, "Ahh, I don't wanna do this shiiit today." Everyday. Or maybe it was because the first time I met him he was talking to another student about buying a shotgun. "Yeah, fifty bucks, fifty bucks man, and you can get a nice sawed off. It'll blow off an entire car door. That's what I'm getting cuz you hear about that kid at Shultz? Yeah, yeah, shot right on Kimball, you know the news be saying he's an honors students and shit. But fuck no he ain't an honors student, that's just what they say for all of them that get blown away. 50 bucks, just 50 bucks and he'd still be here, you know?"

I waited for the teacher to talk to him but she moved on, so I walked away too, not knowing how to respond, as I heard him imitating a nasally white girl voice, "Oh I can't handle this shit!" saying it under his breath, referring to me, the white assistant teacher, who didn't know what to do and didn't know what to say yet. Testing me out and seeing how I'd react to all this talk.

Little Man was called little man for a reason. He was tiny and yet he spoke so loud, and soon I began to laugh at his jokes, the jokes he often made at his expense due to his small stature. He wrote about having asthma as a child and overcoming it, while the rest of the class laughed at him, telling him that's nothing, that some college ain't gonna give a shit about his asthma going away.

But Little Man was being modest because there was so much that he didn't say. We only found out about it when we could see the bruises on his frame, when he limped into the class and showed us the marks covering his back. "At first you could see the ring marks on my skin," Little Man said while smiling proudly and pulling his shirt down. He said another member was getting initiated into the gang and he got beat down, either in the entire melee or as a sacrifice to the initiation. He winced in pain and I just subtly shook

my head, not wanting to say anything to push him out of the class and not really knowing how to find the words to comfort him. But Little Man could read my mind, "You just don't get it," he declared with determination, a kind of swagger in his voice that sounded like he was reciting a rhyme, "This is part of my life. I was born into this. Hell, my grandpa's still in the gang. When you're from the streets it's like you're born into it. And the only way to get out is if you get the fuck away from this city. It's just not that easy."

"Well, just be careful," I respond. I don't even know how many times I have repeated that phrase. It's like the teacher's mantra once you realize and accept students' agencies. It's all you can say sometimes.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I will," Little Man answers but Margarita is not satisfied. Margarita who weeks before talked to me about dropping out of her former school because she was getting beat down every day from rival gang members. Margarita who told me that she's done with running, but that, damn, those were some fun times to be running with her people in the streets. And I retorted, "Oh but there's so much other fun stuff to do!" and she looks at me as if I had just vomited in my mouth. Her face twisted in utter confusion, staring at me like I don't know shit. Jack shit, even.

But now Margarita came to the rescue, working from her own painful past to try to say the things that I could not. "Yeah, real careful, so careful that you let your so-called friends kick your ass. C'mon." She rolled her eyes and Little Man doesn't respond, he just turns his head away while Margarita is still smirking. He faces his computer, slowly typing his autobiographical essay, trying to remember what it was like to overcome asthma.

Visiting Strangers

My friend Susan can't fart. I know, at first I thought she was lying too. But then I saw her doubling over in pain as she tried to force out one tiny burp after the next after our Ethiopian banquet. I just have to feel sorry for that kind of gastrointestinal restriction that prevents anyone from pulling a Dutch oven on a partner or friend.

Susan's lack of flatulence may have prompted her to take a class of students to the sewage treatment plant in Oakland for a field trip. She was unaware of how awfully nasty these farts can smell and that the sewage plant would of course fill the air with thousands of strangers' collective noxious gas. Of course that's just my opinion, since most likely Susan decided to take her class there because she likes to go anywhere new. She's a traveler, one of those strangers hopping from train to train to deliver a letter personally into my open palm. So I had to return the favor and fly out to her stomping grounds, raid her garden, rider her bikes and help her out at her job. And so on my vacation, I was once again put in the role of a chaperone of students I just met. They were going to have to put their trust in me as we navigated the industrial corridor of the bay of Oaklandon on broken bikes and tired lungs.

Susan and I loaded fifteen kids onto bicycles, forcing out of fashion helmets to perch on the top of their heads, despite the numerous verbal objections from the students. Hairstyles ruined, hats needing to be removed as each student strapped the fluorescent plastic to their skulls against their wishes. Every student protected,

but each riding at various skill levels. Some students popped wheelies in the middle of downtown traffic while others were riding slower than a turtle. One student's asthma was acting up and a couple other girls just not wanting to push themselves to peddle more than twice a minute.

We rode down broken sidewalks with semi trucks barreling down the highway past us, leading these students I met just five minutes prior as we ride to the central location of the east bay's human shit basin. With one girl handing me her gold sequined purse that I hold on my shoulder while yelling, "Get out of the road! Out! Out!" as trucks honked and swerved. We finally make it to the center of shit, and somehow lock up a pile of bikes to one pole.

Our tour guide walks us through the step by step process of taking excrement out of the water supply, purifying the toilet water and then eventually returning it back into circulation. With each step it progressively smells worse, each station taking in the human waste and running it through some complicated process to save the world from our tons of waste. Sewage compacted into solid cakes of crap and the water filtered out, bleached and sent back into the bay. The kids found ear plugs and decided to stick them up their nose instead, defeating the monstrous smell that we had endured for almost an hour already.

Ducks patiently floated on the water that once flowed with sewage, as our tour guides fields questions from the students: "Do you find drugs in the sewers?" and "Do you get to keep them?" The tour guide answers the questions, but also shifts nervously with the teachers. An occasional ear plug shoots out of a student's nostril with the knowledge that they probably shouldn't be asking these questions.

"How much money have you found in the sewers?"

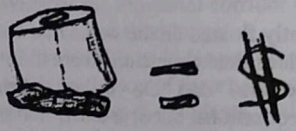
"Usually if someone finds money, you don't really hear about it. You just pocket it immediately and stay quiet, "the tour guide replied.

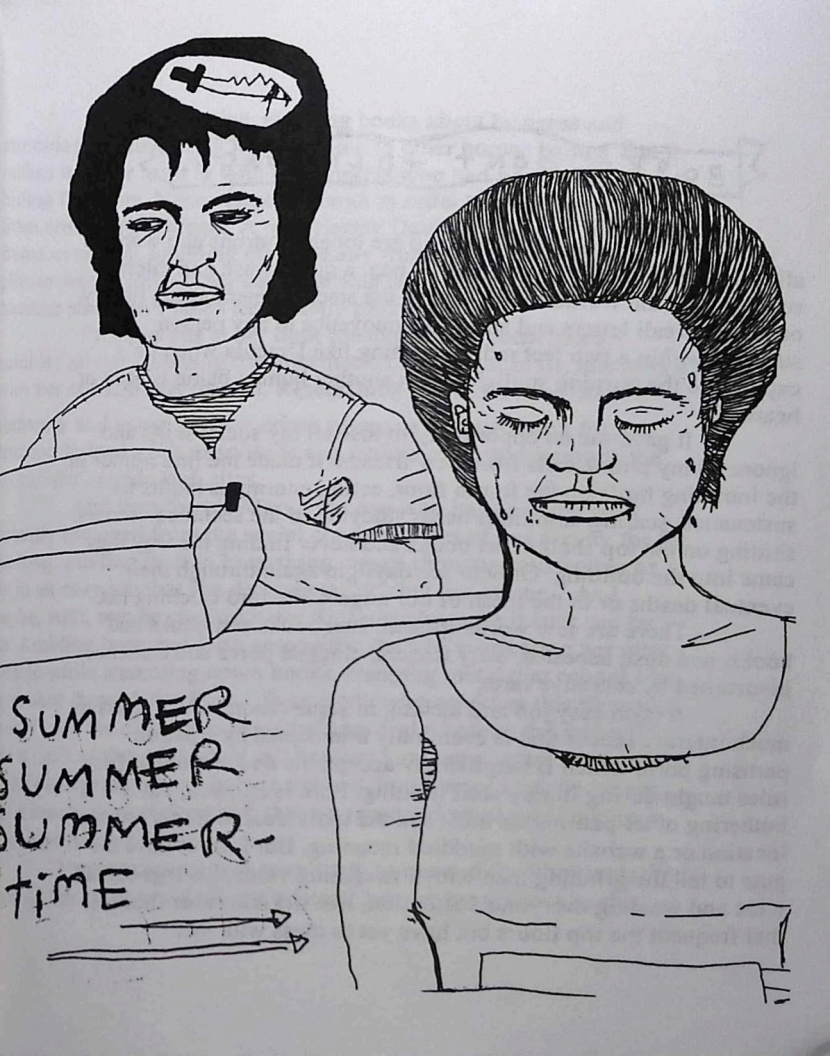
The students finally seemed impressed. "I guess that's the reason to put up with this smell."

"You think this smells bad?" he asks the students.

"OHHHH YEAH," the chorus sings, "How do you deal with this smell every day. It smells like doo doo."

"You think this smells bad? No, to me this smells like money." And I laughed thinking that it was pretty radical to equate the smell of money with the smell of shit, even if our tour guide didn't mean it. But now every time I open up my wallet I think about the stench of the feces of hundreds of thousands of people, compressed into cakes, to filter out the water to make our toilet water drinkable. Just in case we wanted a tiny sip and didn't mind the lingering stench of money from my lactose intolerant self.




SUMMER
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SUMMER-
TIME

BOOKS don't TALK BACK.

Libraries are for those who are lonely. Patrons and workers alike. For the homeless to enter for a nap, a quick wash and internet solitaire. For the workers who hide in the stacks remembering library of congress call letters and showing annoyance to any person standing within a two feet radius. Hissing like Dracula when he's exposed to the burning sunlight when another human being is seen or heard.

It gave me an opportunity to lose all my social skills and ignore all my phone calls from new friends. It made me find humor in the intruding birds on the fourth floor, eating enormous moths for sustenance, scaring ambitious nerds studying in the secluded corners, shitting on the top shelf of art books and never finding the way they came into the building. Only to see daylight again through their eventual deaths or in the mesh of our huge white bird catching net.

There are few words spoken. Just books and books and books, and dust, asbestos, dirty fingers, clogged pores and a silence interrupted by secretive farts.

It is an easy job and lacking in supervision, which leads to much internet access that is eventually interrupted by a patron perusing porn, which is surprisingly acceptable and one of the first rules taught during library staff training. Porn is allowed, but if it is bothering other patrons we must ask the individual to find a quieter location or a website with muddled moaning. But I never have the guts to tell the grinning man with a streaming video, his legs spread wide and wanting everyone's attention, like the notorious flashers that frequent the top floors but have yet to mess with me.

Shifting, sorting, shelving books about business and atrocities and forgetting how to speak to other human beings. But it makes it easier to fit in with the workers who had been in the stacks, hiding for years. Nancy appears tough in order to avoid questions from university students. A new Harley Davidson shirt on her wide frame everyday, laughing occasionally from an excess of caffeine pills or weed, while other days warning me to leave her alone because she hasn't taken her "happy pills today."

Precious sits at her desk reading about recent murder suicides all day, relaying the information to the rest of us, infecting us with her constant depression. Researching the worst news about humanity and using the new crime sprees as a justification for her decision to lead a life of solitude and maintain a subscription to the top murder suicide web sites.

And then there's Meryl, the one who has been the most distantly removed from the social conduct codes of our society for far too long. Finding fault in everything, never showing satisfaction or joy in an easy job that she declares is "driving her insane." And maybe, well, maybe she just hates the world because it isn't run by her. Ambling back and forth among the shelves, expressing her utter distaste while slamming down books, clanging metal that echoes like a gun shot through the floor. "Everybody who works at this library couldn't tell the difference from their ass and a hole in the ground!" And it isn't as though I could tell her that I am very aware of my ass and its distinction from a hole in the soil, but it would just be no use. I am a lonely bookshelver and she is a seasoned employee lacking in any compassion for the world.

The circulation desk won't talk to me and the librarians, the cream of the crop, avoid all eye contact. Just let me go back to the

books, to the words that don't talk back, and my own secret hiding places. I walk away while Meryl finds another victim, a library administrator, the devil incarnate in her eyes, opening her mouth to have the entire population of the building hear, "This place looks like a goddamn FLEA MARKET! Not that I don't like flea markets, because I do shop there, but this is supposed to be a LIBRARY FOR GODSAKE, NOT A GODDAMN FLEA MARKET!" The administrator tries to run but the fury follows her around every shelf, every office, down the stairs, the elevator shafts and into the secluded bird holes that are finally discovered by the echoes of Meryl's shrill voice.

The library. Once so tempting. Such an ideal job until placed in a building with other bitter depressed neurotics that show me a glimpse of my future self, like the most pessimistic crystal ball.

"You ever been to Oakland?" He has one and a half eyes open, focusing on my bare and tattooed arms.

"Yeah, I've been there."

"You from there?"

"No, I'm from here."

"No, no you ain't. You are definitely from the west coast. I can see it in you, with these, these things here." He grabs my arm to twist and turn it for a better look. "Crazy shit on here."

I sigh and wiggle my arm away from his grip. "No, sir I am from here. For sure."

"Oh, ok." I am stationed at the front door of the library, only raising my head from my book when the alarm rings and bags are opened. On days that I wear short sleeves I get the men asking me questions about tattoos and pain. And all I can do is make a mental note to wear longer shirts. "Well, uhh see I need a bit of change for the bus—"

"Sorry sir I can't give you change here," I interrupted him a little bit too quickly that caused him to become defiant.

"Well, no I wasn't asking for change. I don't want your money. I wasn't looking for your money. I don't need it." His one eye opened three quarters now, before sinking back to the half full position.

"Ok, sir, that's fine." Still staring at me with those crooked eyes, now with resentment towards me and my quick assumptions.

"Ya'll got sandwiches in here or something to eat?"

"No, sir this is a library."

"What you don't got sandwiches or something in here that I could buy?"

"No, no food."

"Then what do you have here then?" He was getting impatient, believing me to be a liar about my hometown and the status of food.

"We have books in here. This is a library."

"Oh, yeah, books. Books you say? That anyone could read? I could just pick one up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, oh sounds great, great, well I better check this out." He walked in and five minutes later he was escorted out by the head librarian. She said he was walking around touching people and believing that there would be tuna sandwiches to purchase. And that I had failed once again to be an attentive security force.

There must be ghosts in this place. The ghosts that fly through the library drawing weenies on desks, declaring the spots in which they masturbated in blue ink, and engaging in decade long conversations with other ghosts on the fading wooden carrels. There must be ghosts who are stuck in the mid nineteen-nineties, never being able to leave the building to receive updates from the outside world, still referencing Howard Stern by declaring that his penis is the size of a tiny dot carved into the desk. These must be the ghosts that return in the middle of the night, unseen by us workers and write new declarations of love and sexual agility over and over again on every piece of furniture in the library.

But then there might be other ghosts, the angry ghosts, in the basement. With the boiler room door open, long fluorescently lit hallways and automatically locked doors to a warehouse of books that folks no longer read. The books that have lost their cache with outdated economics textbooks or math journals that their longtime subscribers have abandoned. These stacks of forgotten formulas and memories live the rest of their lives compacted into mechanical shelves. Push a button and they open with the sound of a truck backing up. Closing and compressing like an accordion, as I sit in the middle of one of those shelves, shifting heavy math journals from the nineteen-sixties, wondering the likelihood of being crushed by the only books not worth dying for.

Stretching and organizing in this dank basement and in the other warehouse I hear the sound of the shelves moving on their own. It must be the ghosts, moving the shelves to find their favorite reading materials. And I started moving faster, looking for my potential escape route, wondering if I could make it out of the compacting shelves in time if the ghosts found me and decided to make me into one of their own. All alone down there in a locked warehouse, forgotten along with the books, to be crushed by

mechanical shelves, until days later they would find me deceased, and the desks would be covered with my terrible handwriting with inappropriate jokes about boners and descending uteruses.

And then I heard the pounding from the locked doors and knew that I had not been forgotten. Luna was at the door, a faithful employee for over ten years at the library.

"Luna do you hear the ghosts down here?" she followed me back to my shifting station, her shoulders hunched forward from years of carrying books, her long brown hair dangling in strands around her face, pushed forward to cover the balding areas on her head.

"No there aren't ghosts down here," she laughed, a rare occasion for the older library employees.

"Yeah, I swear," slyly smiling, hoping to get another laugh from her, "You hear them moving the shelves around? There's no one else down here but me."

"No, there aren't ghosts. That just happens sometimes. And besides, I don't feel anything down here. There's no spiritual activity. I would know."

"Oh yeah, well I am psychic too, so why do you think you know better than me?" Hiding my teeth with my sarcastic grin, knowing that my ghost theory was full of cracks.

"Well, I just know. I have had a bunch of paranormal experiences my entire life. This place is not haunted as much as you would like it to be." She passed me a journal and we continued to shift.

"No way you saw a ghost? You're fooling me."

"No, I swear. You don't have to believe me but my childhood home was haunted. I knew it in seventh grade and my sisters and I had this bedroom that was near the kitchen on the second floor of the house. It was kind of a strange house, just the way it was laid out. But one night I was having trouble sleeping because I was

hearing all this noise. I just thought it was my sister snoring, but when I opened my eyes there was this woman walking through the room. She was covering her face with her hands and walking towards me. I remember her exactly, she was kind of translucent and wearing this beige and black checkered dress. She kept on walking closer and closer to my bed and I started yelling to wake up my sister, and as she got right up next to my bed she took her hands away from her face. And I was so scared I didn't know what to do that I just closed my eyes really tight and when I opened them she was gone. I shook my sister awake and told her about it, but she told me not to tell my mom because then they'd put me in the insane asylum. And my dad delivered milk to the insane asylum and told us how horrible it was, so we knew not to do anything or say anything that would land us there. So we saw her enter the room a bunch of times throughout the years that we just got used to it and kind of thought of her as a part of our family. But when I was older and my parents had died, I had a friend over to help me clean out the house and sell it. She was in the living room talking to me and she looked down the hallway and said, 'Oh, your aunt is here.' And of course I knew that nobody was coming over that day and I looked down the hallway into the kitchen and no one was there. She persisted that she had seen someone and I kept on telling her that no one was here. But then she told me she had a beige and black checkered dress on, and I knew it was the ghost. And after I finally sold it, I found out that the lady that lived there before us had killed hung herself from the ceiling fan that was over my bed. That's what happens to spirits when they aren't settled. I took a class about ghosts too. They told me that."

"Oh jeez," I interjected while slowing down the assembly line of books.

"No, this place isn't haunted, nor is that other science building where all the students kill themselves over their grades. I

went there and I didn't feel anything." I was excited to be working with a full time ghost hunter and I admitted that I had just been joking about the library being haunted. "Yeah, there's nothing haunted here, just a lot of weird stuff, like that bathroom with the hole in the wall," she was talking about the notorious glory hole in the art department men's bathroom, "When someone told me about that hole in the wall I was so confused and had to ask what it was used for. And when they told me that they stick their penises in there I still didn't get it, only until later, when I had to really think hard about it. It was so disgusting and of course only men would just stick their things anywhere."

"Yeah, but the girls' bathrooms are pretty nasty here too, with messed up graffiti all over the walls."

"Yes, but no holes in the wall. I guess there would be no purpose to it. But there is some girl on the staff that pees all over the seat and when she has her period she bleeds all over the seat too. For a while I just thought it was an accident and then I got to thinking she was one of those peoples, you know, who enjoy that thing."

"What like an exhibitionist?"

"Yeah, she's one of those, leaving her junk all over the seat for us to see. One day I'm going to find out who it is and give her a piece of my mind." I tried to narrow the employee down in my mind, using my theory that only fancy girls pee on toilet seats while the rest of us are left to hover, adding to the collection, or cleaning up their mess for them. "No, there aren't ghosts around here, just a bunch of perverts," and then the shelves moved on their own and we laughed, nervously.

Riding my bike down a street named after another dead president in the succession of many many dead last names. The sweat dripping down my front and back, sunscreen on my arms and a grey helmet protecting my skull from the glass covered pavement, from the grill of an automobile. Making this daily half an hour trek to the library, an air conditioned building that soaks up my sweaty mess within fifteen minutes of entering. Riding past the abandoned cook county hospital, the doors boarded up, windows graffitied, folks standing around looking for the new hospital just a few blocks away. Fists bounding on the boarded up doors, still hoping for a response on the inside, for cheap treatment and long waits.

"Hey nice tattoo!" wakes me up from my slumber. The comment being yelled out the window of a stopped red Chevy.

"Thanks" is all I can do to respond. The red car in the turn lane, ready to leave my sight as I ride forward to the dilapidated university library. The pot holes on this block are stubborn and obtrusive, causing nervous bounces and swerves into a usually empty road. But I turn my head to see the red Chevy still following me, very slowly, waving the cars behind him around. Those cars revving up their engines in impatience, until it is me and the red Chevy alone on the street and he drives slowly next to me, window open, eyes on me instead of the road.

"Where did you get it?" he screams across a lane of pavement.

"Massachusetts!" I yell back, still focused on the road and arriving to work on time. Assuming that a curt answer referencing a far off state, though the truth, will end this conversation.

"Where in Massachusetts?" he responds, jolting the steering wheel back and forth while straddling two lanes of traffic.

"Northampton!"

"I'm a tattoo artist! I just like the work!" He yells out the window as I am still pedaling towards the library.

"Oh yeah," is all I can say. He waves his hand towards a driveway a few feet ahead and I decide to stop and talk to him. I hoped that I could get some free tattoos out of it, or maybe a discount. And maybe I was totally hungover and it was hot as hell and I was tired of moving for a second, but I followed him. I pulled over into that townhouse driveway. His red Chevy pulled up behind me.

"That is some nice, nice work. You know I am an artist to I like to check out other people's stuff. Do you think I could I take a photo of that?" He smiled at me and shook my hand. It didn't seem like such a strange request and I obliged. He went back into the Chevy to grab his point and shoot camera, all the while talking about his tattoo shop in the Western suburbs and the tattoo convention he would be attending. He hand me stand still, my nerdy helmet still on my head, sweat dripping down my arms and point and clicked.

"Yeah, yeah thanks. I like this tattoo. I like this a lot, I like this…fetish." He paused before saying the last word and I furrowed my brow. "No, I mean this underarm hair you have. I did it. It's cool." I hadn't shaved my armpits since my freshman year of high school. The hair was an unruly bunch, occasional strands of red being thrown into the mix out of nowhere, causing my friends to call me inappropriate names.

"Ok," was all I knew how to say.

"Can I see this," he pokes his hand under my pit, "You got a lot there." I raise my arm and show the brown and red strangles of hair, stringy and occasionally covered in dead skin. He lifts his camera fasts and tries to steal a photo of my flowing arm pits. I throw my arm back down and he looks embarrassed. "Yeah that's nice, real nice. You would be perfect for my site. Yeah, I run this website for

umm girls like you. You know, hairy girls, all natural. I have a really successful website fully dedicated to women's arm pit hair. I am really digging this here. You sure you ain't from Seattle with this hair and all?"

"No, no I'm sure." Once again annoyed at the idea that I was lying about my strict loyalty to the windy city.

"Well, do you think I can get your number or something because I think you would be great for the site, just really great. You know it features girls like you with tattoos and hair." I turned around and noticed a townhouse owner poking her head out of the second floor window. Her eyes were as distrustful of us as I was beginning to become of the fetishizing man in front of me.

"Listen, I gotta get going to work…"

"No just give me your email address. I don't have any cards on me, but for real it's a top notch site. Legitimate. And you would be perfect for it. I can just send you some info. Here." He forced a notepad into my hands and I wrote down an email address that I barely checked. He tore off a piece of paper and handed his address to me, guaranteeing that we would be in contact soon.

That day he emailed me twice. Attaching photos of girls with hairy arm pits and tattoos standing next to graffiti. They weren't even naked or anything, just wearing a tank top and looking angry. In his third email of the day he told me that I would be paid five hundred dollars. And then I started listening to him.

Five hundred bucks to stand outside with my dirty pits in the air. Five hundred bucks to look annoyed and angry for men who enjoyed those few scraggly red hairs with no decipherable origin. Five hundred bucks to pay off school, student loans, do what I want. It seemed so ridiculous that I knew it had to be true.

I wrote back to him and told him that I would be into doing it as long as I didn't have to be naked and if I could possibly hide my

face. He never really responded, but instead kept on sending me photos of arm pits and messages that hyped up every photo shoot: "We will meet and I will tell you about another shoot for 1,00,0 dollars. Very clean. I promise" His emails were so frequent and demanding that it began to seem sort of creepy, and when I asked him about the procedure he wouldn't respond again, just kept on demanding that we have a test shoot before I get paid for my real shoot.

And then upon showing some of my friends my beautiful arm pits, they told me that it was probably a scam, which I had been trying to ignore for over a week. I also thought about my photos on the website and what might happen to my weird looking face. Imagining my students exclaiming, "Hey teach nice pits!" when they stumbled over the site. Or walking by the men looking at adult sites at the library until they finally find sexy-hairy-creepy-armpit-fetish-hippiecrap.com and point me out amongst each other as I passed with a cart of books. And yes the money would help me pay for school and the loans, but the guy was beginning to creep me out with his persistence. Sending early morning emails declaring, "Meet me at Buckingham Fountain, NOW!" and even though my arm pits are perfectly awesome, I was beginning to really doubt that pictures of them would be worth five hundred dollars.

So I decided to close that chapter of my life, with him responding angrily, 'Fine there are plenty of other women that I want to photograph with more experience and looks than you. And I would have you know that I am registered under the better business bureau. You can take it up with them if you are unhappy with my services. Good bye!" I went home, raised my arm, and broke the sad news to my pits, once again denying them their chance to be uncomfortably famous.

Driving home to see dead dog. My dead dog to be illegally buried in the backyard. On a land in between bickering neighbors and futile cocktail parties as methods of reconciliation.

I started to believe that she would never die. That her hearing loss and blindness were just temporary setbacks as she slowly navigated her way around the world with her nose. And that stream of puss from her tear ducts never healed after a large dog opened his mouth and nonchalantly crushed her skull. But this was it. She was finally gone. My mother and brother smuggled her out of the vet's office in a cardboard box and began the digging.

I arrived when they had just hit the stubborn clay, only the second layer. We still had to get to the gravel before we could lower the plastic tub my mom purchased at Target into the ground. A tiny tub that we could curl her stiffened body into. I didn't want to argue about biodegration or decomposition, just mentioning it once and my brother snapped. I also didn't want to see her dragged up out of the ground by another animal, as my brother reminded me, "Don't you remember our bunny Gregger?" Oh yes, Gregger. The first real pet that thrived outside of a musty fish bowl. He lived in the garage and the kids had grown tired of him and his egg yolk urine. We would take him out occasionally and pet him, but most of the time we left the garage door open to air out his rancid stink. From too many days that we refused to clean his cage. From all those years we had live without the knowledge that bunnies are actually really horrible defecators. But one day a hungry dog got whiff of that horrible egg yolk urine smell, opened up Gregger's cage, stuffed our pet into his mouth and walked into our backyard to continue his feast. The site of the majestic white dog licking himself in our backyard moved us off the sofa seats and we urged out parents to check on the injured dog, tending its wounds in our backyard.

My brothers and I thought about saving this beautiful creature, adopting it as one of our own, and maintaining our interest for possibly longer than two months. So my mom, my brothers and I snuck into the backyard slowly, fearful of the dog, but also hoping to save it. My mom took the final brave steps towards the dog, only to return back to us, hiding near the white siding of the house, and reported that the dog wasn't injured. The dog was eating Gregger and we had all been watching the dog eat our pet for over twenty minutes now. We went back into the house, my mom closed the blinds and the next day she found the rest of him and buried his bones in a spot that we would never discover. No, I did not want that episode to be repeated again.

"What are you doing out here?" I had become so concentrated on digging through the gravel with my tiny shovel that I hadn't notice a man next door approach my amateur grave.

"Uhh, just digging a hole." I couldn't say that we were illegally burying our dog of seventeen years.

"Looking for gold, eh?" He tugged on his lip, twisting it around as a form of interrogation.

"Naw, just digging a hole, nothing special." I just kept on shoveling, not wanting to answer anymore questions from him as he peered his head into the two feet deep crevice.

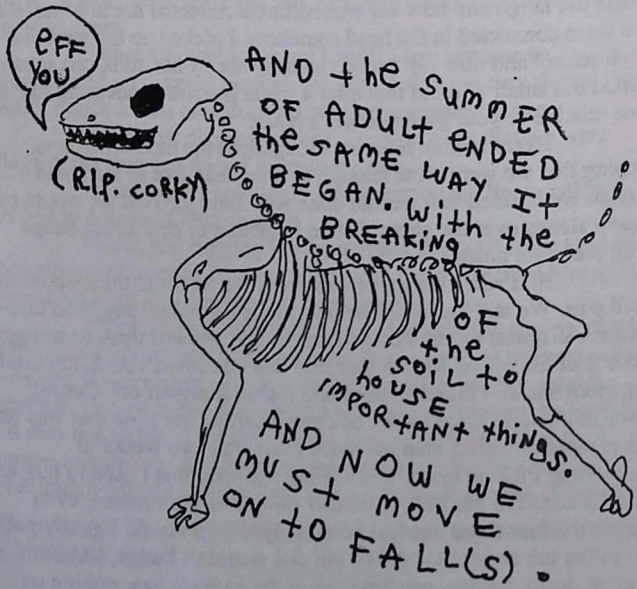
"Nice looking hole then," he declared while staring straight at me, using his concentrated eye contact as a form of interrogation, believing that we were engaging in some sort of wealthy neighbor sabotage. Something to fuss about because their lives are so boring and they are afraid to get their hands dirty in methods other than passive aggression. And he could not stop me. I kept on digging, occasionally spying on him from behind my dark glasses, the glasses that would not be removed throughout the entire day in order to hide my bloodshot eyes.

"Well, it's not for me is it? I mean, if it is for me then just bury me up to here." He placed his hand on his jugular and my brother returned with a smoke. Though incapacitated at most things in life, my brother still possesses more confidence than me. Or maybe I misread his behavior as confidence instead of seeing it as his all out rage against humanity. He shooed the man away, while I smacked the mosquitoes biting away at my ankles and lower back. Digging away as fast as I could to prevent myself form thinking. Knowing that she had been dead for over two hours now and a good burial is exactly what she needed for all the memories I had of her. All the times she made me laugh and how her stubbornness reflected me in a way that we were connected in the head somehow. I picked up her smell in high school and now my friends identify me by her stink, the musty rotted out smell of mold that after a while becomes endearing like a lost relative or your grandmother's house.

Every half an hour we brought out the measuring tape, hoping that we were close enough to three feet. But as the hours passed we decided that we had done well enough. That we would put heavy stones over the grave that no large dog or deer could budge with their wet noses.

And when the grave was done, we forgot to think about the hard part. We still had to lift her out of the cardboard dog food box—a clever disguise by the vets and nurses that allowed them to smuggle her out of the office. My brother said that he couldn't do it, nor could my mom and so I breathed deep and just shut myself off. Cutting away at the tape, opening the box and smelling her stink that was ten times more powerful than my musk even after two weeks of showering. Picking her up and feeling her body that I used to hug and kiss the scruff of her neck no matter how fowl she smelled, even during the four times she had been sprayed by a skunk. I gently put her in the tub as her paw poked out and wouldn't budge, stubborn even in death. Frozen, reaching out of the garbage bag, poking us

with her nails. My mom manipulated it inside and we sealed the lid. Marching to the side yard, carrying my dead dog in a supply tub, wishing I could have seen her again even after her second stroke, held her when she shook, wishing I could have cleaned her eyes and hugged her from behind one last time, before we lowered her into the ground and piled brick after brick on top of her grave, neighbors spying, mother getting nervous and hoping that we wouldn't see her tiny body again.



observations at school # five

The blown out speakers muddled every word coming out of the student emcee's mouth. Only exaggerated calls for cheers were actually heard over the buzzing and the feedback in this overheated gym in a building that is far too old to have ever known air conditioning or fans. Waving his hands in the air to the rows of students, sectioned off in accordance to their graduating year, the freshmen to the seniors, each year the student population thinning out. and all day I had heard the chants of 2010 screamed through the hallways, written on the jeans and cheeks of my students who were oh so proud of their age group. Proud enough to shake the hallways with their chants, put in school colored hair tracks on their friends' scalps and pull the fire alarm in celebration of this fine day: the homecoming assembly. And my first day at Connors high school.

My mentor teacher sat me down after the first period. "You sure you wanna do this?" he asked as if to scare me away, "The kids in here are homeless, in foster care, come from broken homes or violent homes. Some are wards of the state that have already walked through the classroom today. You think you can handle this line of work?" But I think this warning was more reflective of his own views

of his students. The low expectations he's placed on them, the lack of work he accomplishes in class, the belief that he is serving them by not pushing them to learn, but by passing them grade from grade through the system, because he believes that they can't learn. Those were what those warnings said to me and the three periods of classes I witnessed in which students slept on their desks or pretended to read silently as he too read a book at his desk, occasionally barking out "shuttit!" to those disinterested in the regimented daily sustained silent reading.

"What other schools have you been to before?" I gave him my track record of schools, most had been primarily Latino/a schools and two were more integrated, a rare occasion within the CPS system. There was never a legally mandated comprehensive segregation policy in Chicago Public schools, so accordingly schools reflected the segregated housing patterns in the city. The few white students that remained in the system went to prominent magnet schools closer to the loop, while Latino/a students over represented schools on the northwest side of the city, and one hundred percent African-American schools lined the west and south sides. Connors was an all African-American school and I think Mr. Rogan, one of the few white teachers at the school, was trying to scare me out of the building, like he had done to his former student teacher. His student teacher showed up for his first day and never came back again, never even notified the school or teachers, just disappeared without giving any notice.

But I had made it through the first day with cracked open fire alarms and screams in the hallway. I lined up against the wall with the rest of the faculty, standing in front of the open door and receiving the only form of air circulation for the entire gym, while the students were stuffed into the stands fanning themselves with their palms.

"ANNNND NOWWW GETT READY FORRRR YOURRRR-" The public address system still cutting out as the football team ran under the streamers placed over the basketball hoop. Storming into the gym with such enthusiasm that I didn't want to stop clapping for them. A team that had only won one game, in a school known for its basketball program, and yet we were still clapping and the students were still chanting their years back and forth at each other like challenges. The sophomores stood up, adding obscenities to their chants against the seniors, calling out, "Fuck 08! Fuck 08!" and thrusting their hips forward in unison until the seniors replied with a similarly vulgar message.

The chants continued until the music returned and the cheerleaders took the floor for their choreographed routine. Booty shaking-a-booty shaking on the middle of the dance floor. All cheerleaders lined up from shortest and skinniest to tallest and chubbiest. Bellies falling out from under their small shirts as they dipped to the Soulja Boy song that no one can get outta their heads. For one girl the dip was fatal, falling onto her ass to the delight of the rest of the school population, including the teachers. As we all glanced at each other with smirks on our faces as she wiped herself off and continued on with her groove. Red spandex pants, white t-shirts from the 80's, with pit stains to match and the cheerleaders performed with pride even when faced with the occasional embarrassing misstep or sexualized move that caused the audience to squirm.

The song and hip sways seemed to drag on forever until the emcee stepped in again, his microphone gurgling and announcing his own opportunity to dance for the audience. He ran over to the sound guys and picked his song, while both he and his friend started breaking and krumping for the rest of us. Legs flying off the ground,

arms shaking fast with bodily contortions and I wish I had a notebook to write down their moves. Two students in the stands got angry, started rushing the stage and watching them dance closely with threats being exchanged. The teacher next to me told me that the emcee and his friend always dance at assemblies and the other students are getting angry because they want a chance to show off their skills. And then someone stepped too close and it happened, a great big impromptu dance off occurred in the middle of the gym. The one student from the stands challenging them, his legs bending like rubber, chest falling flat on the wooden floor, squirming like a worm until easily back on his feet again like magic, while throwing his arms back to do a back flip. The crowd went crazy, cheering on the new competitors who were giving the emcee and his friend a run for their money. Bodies contorted into positions that I had never even imagined, crawling back up from the floor with their chests pumped forward, arms crossed, watching their opponents dance to the beat.

The teacher next to me told me that dance offs happen often in the hallways. A student will become upset with another student and instead of engaging in violence, they will blow off steam through dancing, the winner always proudly walking away, while the loser, as judged by the students surrounding them, will have to wait until the next showdown. Watching these dancers turn and sweat to the sounds and cheers I was amazed by their skills. One more turn and then the dancing was too much, the bodies moved in close, chests pushing against one another until someone quickly cut the music, teachers separated the students and the rally proceeded as if we hadn't seen something completely amazing.

The hours dragged on. Cheering became sparse even for the local hip hop artist and DJ from a major radio station. It was just too hot in that gym and the kids were getting tired, trying to get up and leave out the only open door, until they were met with the towering

presence of the security force. And finally after another song of the local hip hop artist, performing at the school as a part of his mandated community service hours, the final call for applause was yelled across the shaky system. The students standing at the top of the bleachers all tossed their cardboard signs that proudly declared their graduating years. The 2010 sign bounced off of a teacher's head as he reared his eyes around to try to spot the culprit.

The students were dismissed, sweat running down their faces as they sprinted towards the oversized silver balloons and decorations. Ripping them down from the basketball hoops and claiming them as their own property. Seeing the numbers 2, 0, 0, 7 all exit in different directions, gripped in various hands for the trip home. My pits were soaked and the students walked passed me needing the fresh air that I desperately required as well. I felt the blood dripping down my legs from the period that started at eleven o'clock, with nothing left to do for it. I just let it roll down the black pants, feeling the insecurities I had always felt as a bleeding teenager with a body that was a stranger to me with its own rules and regulations occurring against my wishes. Knowing the humiliation that I would endure if I was spotted and not taking a seat for the rest of the day in order to maintain my dignity.

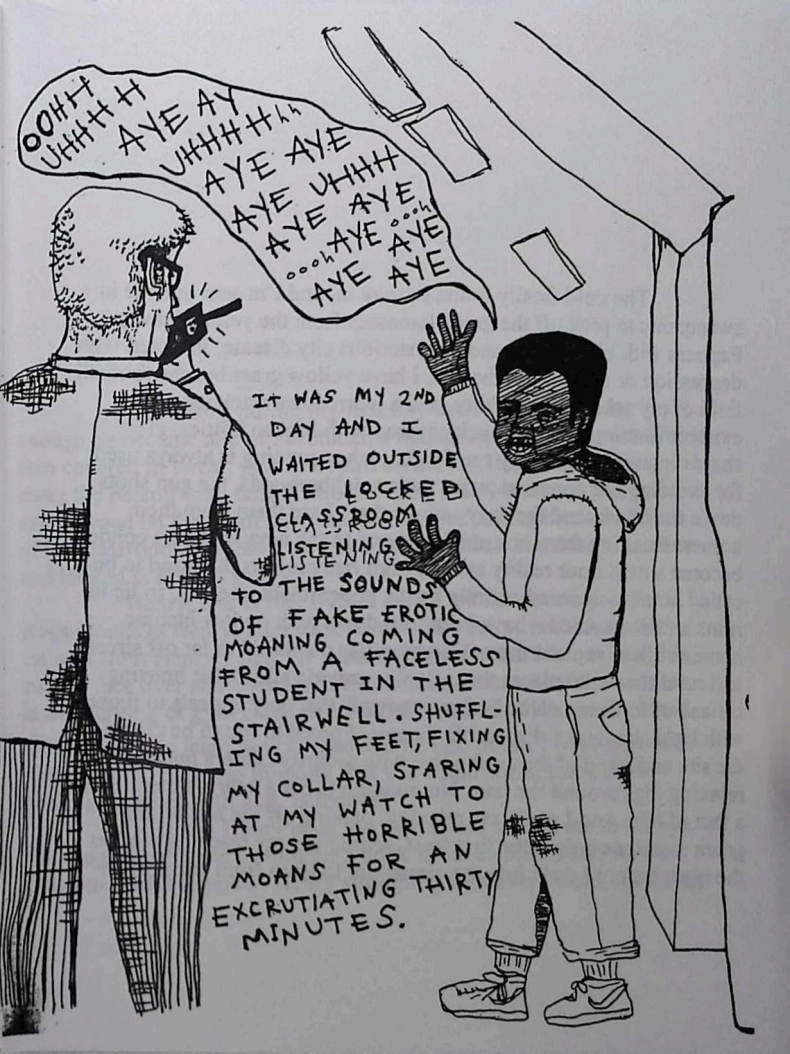
And so, with the dripping of my pits, the accident in my pants, and the dirt around my collar, I was properly welcomed back to high school.

"Watch out! Watch out! Nothing is more dangerous than a white school teacher."

–Paul D. in *Beloved.*

87% of Chicago Public School students are Black and Latino and 47% of the teaching force is white, many entering schools with biases, pity, low expectations, or visions of missionary accomplishments. When public education is a function of the state, one enforcing white middle class values, language, socialization, which can be a colonizing function. It can distance students from their homes and communities when schools tell them that what they are saying, doing, how they are living, who they are, is wrong. Disparaging histories and identities in order to fill out Scantron forms. And this is the part of the state that employs me, and with that knowledge I cannot just think it'll come easy. That just by recognizing it the problematic nature of being a white teacher educating a classroom of students from different racial and class backgrounds than me will just go away. This isn't the fucking after school special of the week of the white teacher entering the troubled urban school to save the kids. It isn't that fucked up archetype and it never will be. No, for myself I demand that I am self-critical, rethinking, examining my "authority," my privilege, calling me on my shit, and not remaining static while wearing used Buster Browns and a starched collared shirt. And please if you must, call me Ms. B., even if it still causes me to cringe.

(Even as the months have passed I have realized my mistakes. From being too uptight or too forgiving. Re-evaluating my steps to make sure that some days all these doubts and struggles will make a difference.)


OOHH UHHHH AYE AY UHHHHHH AYE AYE AYE UHHHH AYE AYE OOOH AYE OOOH AYE AYE
IT WAS MY 2ND DAY AND I WAITED OUTSIDE THE LOCKED CLASSROOM LISTENING TO THE SOUNDS OF FAKE EROTIC MOANING COMING FROM A FACELESS STUDENT IN THE STAIRWELL. SHUFFLING MY FEET, FIXING MY COLLAR, STARING AT MY WATCH TO THOSE HORRIBLE MOANS FOR AN EXCRUTIATING THIRTY MINUTES.

The cold finally found its way in, and I'm sent outside in sweatpants to pick off the green tomatoes from the yellow leaves. Peppers with black spots and a mysterious city disease, inflicted with depression or mercury in the soil. I have yellow grass but the football field of my school has puddles, and a worn down track for a non-existent running team. A track covered with broken bottles, glass shards in every step. Why run for fun, when running is always used for avoiding the cops that target their neighborhoods, the gun shots down the block, and the angry adults that chase them from their homes. Running from one neighborhood to the next when the condos become a next door reality and the high rise projects that used to be called home— ignored entirely by the government, the city, to lie in ruins and disheveled—have been torn down with no low income homes built to replace them. Communities displaced to far off streets and rural towns, to places that actually provide affordable housing instead of focusing on an "urban renewal" that only appeals to those with light skin and a disposable income. Forced to run to be out of the site and mind of those who live with security camera houses and relaxing jogs around the lake. No, running is not a sport to them; it is a fact of life. And I am home relaxing, picking off the last of the green tomatoes before the first frost, setting out my teaching clothes the night before I walk into the classroom to learn from each other.

I met Henry during my first day at Connors and soon enough he became one of the students that affected me the most. His face covered in sweat, gym shirt still on his stinking body. Wiping away the perspiration falling into his eyes, both permanently crossed and focused on the tip of his nose. Mr. Rogan pulling him and I out of the classroom and into a tiny overheated office. He closed the door and looked at both of us.

"Henry, this is Ms. B. Is it ok if I tell her your secret?" Mr. Rogan looks at Henry, then back at me and a barely audible "yeah" escapes from Henry's lips. He's staring down at the floor, wiping his sweaty face over and over again that makes me unsure if the wetness is from crying or gym class. Mr. Rogan continues, "Henry can't read. But he wants to learn how to read and he also doesn't want anyone else to know. So I was thinking that you could spend some time reading together with him. Is that ok?"

I nod and Henry nods too, still afraid to look me in the eye. Mr. Rogan hands me a children's book about elephants and we sit down to read it together. Henry struggling with every word, including

"th…thhh…thhhhe," stuttering over words and sounds, while still wiping down his face with his gym shirt. Reading together in the sweaty office for seven minutes until the bell rings and he quickly runs away back to his friends, not wanting anyone else to know why he was in that office.

At sixteen years old he's been shuffled through the school system. Passed from year to year and never once being taught how to read. Teachers either unaware of his lack of reading skills or fully knowledgeable and believing it wasn't their problem. That the next year it would be solved, and with each successive year Henry fell further and further behind.

In class he'd open up a book and just stare at the pages, pretending to read so the students around him wouldn't know that he couldn't. Each class period, every day. Just a stare. I asked about a reading specialist and Mr. Rogan told me that the school doesn't have one. That CPS lies and says that they do, because legally every school is supposed to have one on staff. But without enough resources, without enough care for the school, CPS writes off the school as a failure, as one of the worst in the system, in the country, and treats them accordingly. Giving them less resources, less support and cheating the students out of an education that they deserve.

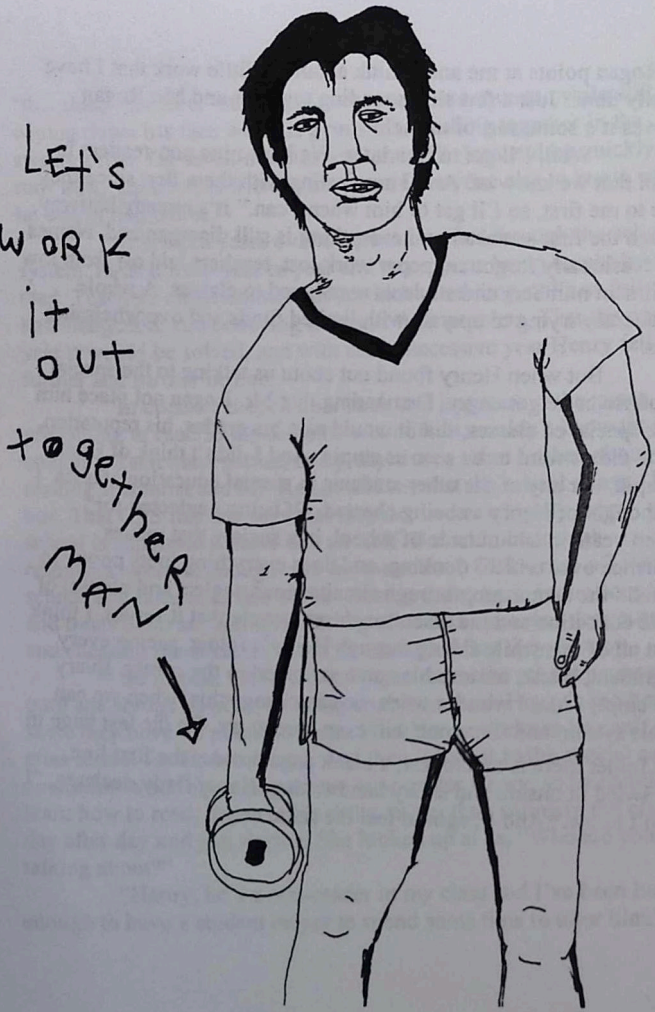
So instead I follow Mr. Rogan to see the school counselor until she shrugs us off after being unable to reach Henry's mother since they have no phone at home. And Henry works so he can't stay after school for extra tutoring. And then we went to the special ed counselor to see about some extra support for Henry, so he could learn how to read, improve his skills, rather than sitting in the class day after day and just staring. She looked up at us, "Who are you talking about?"

"Henry, he's a non-reader in my class and I've been lucky enough to have a student helper to spend some time to tutor him."

Mr. Rogan points at me and I think about the little work that I have actually done. Just a few times reading together and Mr. Rogan believes it's some sort of miracle.

"Well, I'll get to him later. We have nine non-readers in school that we know of. And I am dealing with them first since they came to me first, so I'll get to him when I can." It's already halfway through the first semester and everything is still disorganized. Names are occasionally forgotten, paper work lost, teachers laid off from low enrollment numbers and students reassigned to classes. A whole bureaucracy trying to operate with limited funds and overwhelming needs.

But when Henry found out about us talking to the special ed counselor he got angry. Demanding that Mr. Rogan not place him in the special ed classes, that it would ruin his grades, his reputation, and he didn't want to be seen as stupid. And I didn't think of Henry as stupid, nor any of the other students in special education classes. I just thought of Henry as being cheated. Of being neglected for sixteen years in and outside of school, in a society that values obedience over critical thinking, and does everything in its power to maintain the status quo, through simultaneous neglect and control of public education and the disenfranchised people that it serves. I think about all of this while sifting through Henry's folder, seeing every assignment, blank, besides his name scribbled in the corner. Every page empty. And I wonder when we can change this, when we can fix this system and if anyone will even care to try. On the last page in his folder there is an old test, a blank page besides the first line, scrawled in unsure and shaky handwriting, Henry flatly declares, "I don't know." And I begin to feel the same way.


LET'S
WORK
it
OUT
together
MAN

On Halloween no one came to class. They may have made it to school but were sent away after having their bags searched for eggs. Or sometimes instead of searching they just withstood a solid pat against their back to crack any eggs they were carrying, leaving a mess running along their backsides.

I saw the students sent away in droves, walking back down the two laned street towards the imposing Sears Tower. Some kids just told me that they weren't showing up at all, because there were always threats, occasional egg tossing and this holiday the front door was covered in fresh spray paint from eight competing gangs. All painted one on top of the next during the middle of the night, somehow never bumping into each other. My students and I poked our heads out the windows to try and catch a glimpse of the main door, but the principal spotted us and we threw our heads back inside. Kids chomping on candy and Dayjaneequa gave me a package of bottle caps in her angel costume. She asked Mr. Rogan what he was going to be for Halloween and he shocked us all.

"Well, I have a rotation of a few costumes. One of them is a skinhead, that's my favorite costume. But of course I can't be that here." He giggled and we were horrified, imagining him walking around the streets in a bald cap and whatever fucked up paraphernalia he might posses. He was telling the truth, but he also meant for it to be funny but none of us laughed.

Sort of like a puzzle never meant to be solved. Numbers that don't compute. That one question mulling over and over again in your head preventing an easy night of sleep. Another late night trip to the washroom, another herbal sleep pill to pop in the mouth since there will never be an answer to the questions in your head.

Montreal sits across from me grinning, opening his book and yelling across the class, "Godamn douchebag!"

"Montreal!" Mr. Rogan yells.

"What? That's what it says, that's what it says in the book." Montreal smiles and I would like to read a book with such language.

"Really, really can I see it?" I lean over his desk, his desk scrawled with intricate line drawings. Everyday I try to slip a piece of paper in his direction to save the desk, and everyday the line drawings expand off the paper, onto the beige desktops, weaving in and out of gang graffiti. There will never be a paper big enough for Montreal.

He quickly turns his book around whispering, "Here it is," before flipping it back around. I wasn't trying to be a narc, I just was amused by the supposed word choice in his text. But now even more pleased with Montreal's language use. He looks me up and down, posing questions to figure me out, to get to the heart of who people are.

"So, Ms. B. if this world is hell, would you rather chose to live in hell or go to heaven?" he whispers to me in that silent classroom.

"What? Wait, this is hell?" He won't take his eyes off of me as I squirm under his existential questioning.

"Yeah so if this world is hell, if you believe this world to be hell, would you stay here or go to heaven?"

Not fully prepared to answer the question, but maybe he was concerned for my well being, since many of the students were

amused by my piercings. One student even asked me if I was a "black widow."

"What's a black widow?" I responded.

"You know, like someone who wears all black and stuff and wants to die." Oh no, the kids thought I was a goth.

"Oh you mean a goth? No, no I'm not a goth" And then the kids surrounding him yelled "Nice one moron!" and "Idiot!" in unison, as if they weren't going to ask the same question two minutes prior.

"Well what is heaven, Montreal?" I try to avoid answering his questions, still.

"That's for you to answer. You don't believe in heaven?" Now I was afraid that he was going to judge me on my lack of religious beliefs.

"Well….no."

"Then you would stay here in hell?"

"Well, I would rather be somewhere else than hell I guess."

"So then you'd wanna leave hell?" This kid was making me sweat and wouldn't give up.

"Naw, this sounds like some trick question. What's your answer?" I adjusted my collar, beginning to feel it strangle me under the pressure.

"No, I can't tell you until you tell me." Montreal knew he had me cornered.

"Ok well, I guess I would rather not be in hell, but I don't think this life is hell…"

"So, you saying that you want to die!?"

"No! no! I mean, it just doesn't sound too good to say I want to be in hell." I was thinking that he might tell parents or administrators that I was some straight up Satanist hell-lover.

"Yeah, but this life, even if it is called hell, would you still live it?"

"Yes, I think my life is pretty good."

"That's all I was asking. I would stay here in hell too." His eyes glanced out the window before returning to me.

"Oh, ok. Well, that's good." Then he stared back down on his desk and commenced drawing.

After that day I never saw him again. He just disappeared like some magician. None of the other teachers knew his whereabouts either. Puzzles and tricks from Montreal. But then it was something I got used to. The disappearing acts, like Johnny, another student who struggled with reading. We holed ourselves up in the corner of the library, away from the other students, to protect his secret that he couldn't read. We scanned children's books and he blew through words, making up sounds, quickly mashing together letters to cover up his struggles. We slowed it down, sounded out the words, changing "prrrrrzionsss" to persons and "comfritzirrrrses" to comfortable. He combined all the letters together as a survival technique when being asked to read out loud in class. And now I had to get him to pace himself, look at the letters and not construct a whole new indecipherable language.

He told me that he was seventeen. He had one more year to go. He didn't wanna cause any trouble like the others, he said. All he wanted to do was graduate and get a job. "I just want to graduate, just wanna graduate," was his refrain.

We gave each other high fives in the hallway, until like magic, he too disappeared. Pushed out, dropped out or moved, the paper trail cannot keep up. And eventually there are just their names on graded papers, empty seats and students' questioning that keeps them from being a figment of our imagination, reminding us of the disappearing acts and our failure to stop it.

Bill Gates gave us the monies to follow a curriculum with lesson plans and handouts, all bound up into a book, packaged in a factory and sent into the schools. And then Bill Gates and his money chose what teachers should teach, what students should learn all without stepping one foot near the students, teachers or schools. So when monies want something monies get it, and Bill Gates wants the schools to teach *Huckleberry Finn* when most schools have eliminated it from the curriculum over the years; parents have sued school districts; people have just had it with that book. And Mr. Gates wants it back and he wants two white teachers to teach this white man's book to a class of all African-American students. "Silence, silence!" Mr. Rogan yells when he brings up the use of the n-word. He says it, the word, not the euphemism, as though it is a challenge. That he is not concerned with language use and power. But I will not say it. I have found very few acceptable contexts for a white person to use that word, and the book, well the book uses it over two hundred times. And granted I understand that it is an old book that is using the "local" language, but that isn't the biggest problem I have found. No, it isn't just the word, but the message the context, a white man's book teaching other white people that African Americans are people when they have known it, themselves, since birth. But Mr. Rogan is shouting, saying the word is not racist, that it is like walking into a museum and seeing photos of slaves, that the word is like a document of history, which is still repeated today over and over again. And most of the kids nod, saying that that word is old, they never even call each other that anyways. It's done it's buried. And Mr. Rogan says, "I thought we would have had a riot up in here." And then he turns on the tape, cued up, a white narrator reading the text with a funny accent. A white narrator that then imitates Jim, a black man, in a stereotypical caricature and the

students must listen to until Marcus always screams out "This book is racist!" And Mr. Rogan shouts "Shuttttup!" Every day, day after day. Not even knowing the proper point in the text from the day before, playing the tape and again Marcus yelling, "Who is this a white dude? White dude's can't say that! Why are we reading this?" and then Mr. Rogan's standard response: "Shuttup!" Using the books as pillows, kids getting angry, depressed, rolling their eyes and when I refuse to say the word Norman yells, "Just say ninja!" and I tell them about satire and Marcus says, "I knew it, I knew he was making fun of black people." I must tell him no, that Twain was making fun of the "educated" white folks that still had slaves, and he says, "Even so it's still a piece of racist trash" and I must hide my smile while Mr. Rogan walks back in the class because we were criticizing behind his back. And he walks back into his classroom, the classroom that I was not legally allowed to be alone and in charge of, and he looks at us, critiquing and we go silent, as if we had committed a crime. The recording was off, the tape stopped, never turned on. I didn't want to hear it when I was illegally in control of the classroom. Instead I decided to read it aloud with the class, taking turns, Melissa and Tisha volunteering and struggling with the southern dialects. I didn't wanna call on people, I wasn't sure about their comfort with reading out loud and I still needed to protect Henry's secret. And with the tape back on and rolling, a white narrator acting like a stereotype, the minstrel role, the students silenced with yells against their criticism and I come home and stare at the calendar, trying to remember what century it is.

Dear Mark Twain, oh and Bill Gates too,

I fucking hate yous.

The public hears standards and accountability and go "ooh" in unison to the words of good news. Those words that are so easily thrown around like freedom and democracy, but in reality they all add up to a big jumbled mess made by capitalists and imperialists. But then in walks you, Bill Gates, and your sacks full of money to give to "failing" schools if they follow your set curriculum, read your books, take your tests. Ten other schools in the city and ten thousand students that you and your cronies don't know, have never met, never seen their neighborhoods, never heard their concerns and stories. Never thinking of them as individuals, just lumping them together as failures. And you just set up a curriculum of traditional books, the books you might have enjoyed as a kid, the books that the authorities have stamped as a classic and so we must blindly listen to them, taking the power away from teachers--the teachers who actually talk to their students. But these students are not like you and your cronies, Bill Gates. And Mark Twain, you may have meant well but my students just think you are a crazy racist fool--- with your tricks on Jim, throwing him around like a minstrel, while never once showing the true horrors of slavery in this supposed anti-racist book. So you two knuckleheads and your "well-meaning" white ideals got a lot of explaining to give to my students, if you would actually once walk into the class, meet them, talk to them, see the looks on their faces every time they have to hear that *word* over and over and over again and ask me why they are reading *this* book.

And Bill Gates, I thank you for the money and for your policy to keep the school open (for this year, at least), but the kids have eaten your books for dinner.

boo, LB

"Why are you acting so ghetto?" these were the words coming out of Mr. Rogan's mouth. My mentor teacher's mouth. The one I am supposed to learn from, gain techniques, educational knowledge from his big mouth. The question posed to a student sitting on a desk in classroom in a school that is populated by all African-American students of low socio economic status. A school of 95% free lunches, coming from the last bits of low income housing still in the neighborhood. After the projects had been closed down, the condos moved in and the rest of the neighborhood moved to the distant towns with more abundant section 8 housing. Communities displaced for boxed in condos with large signs reading, "Live in the excitement of the city!" The city that they are destroying through gentrification, community dislocation and substandard education.

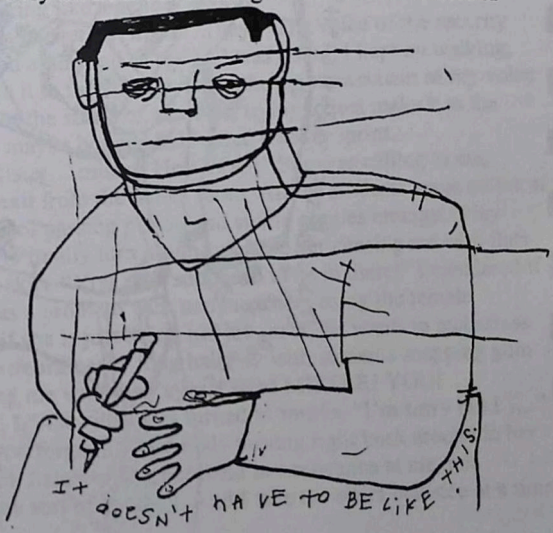
"What did you say!? I ain't acting ghetto!" the student was agitated, obviously.

"Well, then why are you all upset and sitting on the desk. Quit acting ghetto and then I won't say it anymore."

"Like I said, I AIN'T ACTING GHETTO!" She waived her arms around and the rest of the class started yelling at Mr. Rogan too. Students rising up out of their desks in solidarity, knowing that the accusation was wrong and hurtful. And at that moment, while sitting in my observation chair, I had a vision that I stood up with the students and all of our tiny hands lifting up Mr. Rogan, chanting "End to the Tyrant! End to the Tyrant!" We all picked him up with our fingertips, so easily and gently, raising him up over our heads and chanting as he squirmed above us in awe. We walked him over to the window, to the window that he constantly threatens to throw his students out of—the alternate catch phrase to his threats of "I'm

going to beat you"—and then we would throw him out the window, still chanting "End to the Tyrant! End to the Tyrant!" while his large shirt acted as a parachute to gently land him on the ground. He'd look up at us piling out of that third floor window and cheering, and we would return to the class period, to have a discussion about power and language, race and class, inequality and education, speaking of things that are usually silenced or ignored, as Mr. Rogan limps down the street, fearful of his students he was so used to suppressing.

The ringing of the bell—on time for once—brought me back to reality from my overly dramatic but nonetheless triumphant visions. The students filed out, still angry, not looking at him in the face, leaving strands of hair tracks on the ground that had been dropped out of busy amateur hairdressing hands in order to defend their honor.



CONSTANTLY SMELLING the Butt of MY PANTS to MAKE SURE they don't smell. BECAUSE the kids will MAKE FUN OF YOUR DIRTY ASSHOLE
that's something I NEVER READ ABOUT IN ED BOOKS.

(I felt like a traitor.)

"Teacher! Teacher! There's a boy in the girl's bathroom!"

At first I didn't look up, still unaccustomed by the label and status. I stood my ground next to Mr. Rogan's locked door, waiting for his arrival. My eyes focused on the lockers ahead of me, taking note that I was safe, that I had not gone to the bathroom all day. They couldn't possibly be talking about me. Today, at least.

But I also didn't look up because I wondered if the girls waving and shouting about the washroom were referencing the scene in the hallway two days ago. When I walked out of the women's faculty restroom and slammed the door shut, lock into place, holding my breath because inside I knew I should have kept it unlocked, to the access of students and cigarette breaks, remaining inconspicuous in my exit. Then there's the call, the perpetual call that comes from living and looking like a gender hybrid.

"Hey mister….. mister…hey!" The voice of the security guard stationed at the end of the hall was rising. I kept on walking, trying to make it to the stairs without the embarrassment of my voice being heard, of the stares of students, trying to just make it to the stairwell and maybe begin a half-assed smoker sprint.

"Mister….mister! Hey YOU!" She was calling to me, spotting my exit from the ladies room. All the students' eyes on me at the beginning of passing period and subtly giggles emerge. "Hey mister, you!" I finally turn around and see her chasing me with flats and a brown skirt. "You ain't supposed to be in there!" I wondered if the school has a problem with male teachers using the female restroom or if she is just doing her job, or if she wants to embarrass me in this extraordinarily long hallway with students snapping gum and following me with their eyes. "Hey! MISTER! YOU!

"I, I," the kids faces turned to smirks, "I'm sorry but I….."

"Aw forget it." Her body turning right back around in her clickety clack flats, waving her hand in annoyance at me, not providing any sort of apology. And I take the stairs one step at a time

back into my classroom.

The next day I wore a woman's sweater, just a v-neck cut, nothing too scandalous, and a shirt underneath it to cover up. With the tiny bit of femininity the faculty treats me with respect rather than hesitation, while the students discipline each other when I speak. "Shh listen to the lady!" they yell.

But today, my head looks up to the second round of shouts, "Teacher! Teacher! There's a boy in the girl's bathroom!" The two girls huddled together and looking to me in my baggy grey sweater, looking like the most unlikely candidate for gender policing.

"For real?" I finally respond.

"Yeah, yeah there's a boy in there!" I leave my post at the locked classroom door and head over to the student bathroom.

I am still afraid that the trick is still on me. That some incident that cannot be solved by a student assistant/observer with no real authority. I push open the door and walk in to find the boy, peeking his head in and out of every stall, looking for something but mostly appearing confused. His head bobbing left and right as if he had no spine, examining his surroundings and possibly wondering about the absence of urinals in this particular facility.

"Hey, you can't be in here," I declare with determination, only raising my voice slightly. The student looks up at me, still bewildered and runs out in between the two girls who had followed me into the restroom to witness some yelling. But of course they were deeply disappointed at my capacity to scream.

I walked in between them to leave the bathroom, the girls still giggling from the excitement, but I just felt like a real traitor. Remembering all those times that I have been told that I am in the wrong restroom, witnessed ladies exiting the bathroom to wait outside the door, arms crossed and eyebrows slanted towards my direction waiting for my exit until they re-entered, believing me to be an intruder to their precious sanctuary. And though I was upholding the rules of the school, ensuring the safety of the students to go to the washroom in peace, I still felt like a real traitor.

I saw that the cereal was on sale for 3.99 so I wanted to uy it but when I got to the register the man said it was 4.99 and I aid no its on sale right that's why I got it but he wouldn't listen to ne so I hit him and told him its 3.99 like the sign say and I gave him ny money and left and he look at me like he scared because I had hit him in the face and he screamed but he wasn't being right. I just wanted to tell someone about it.

That was the first journal entry I read. I picked up my blue pen and wrote in the margins, "Ouch," "Great writing!", "Do you feel bad about hitting the man? How would you have handled this differently?" and "Thanks for sharing!" before moving to the next piece of paper in the pile. Some students writing a sentence, others hesitating to write at all. Just never feeling that they are worthy of being read. An entry about being sad, another about being scared in shaky handwriting unused to its practice.

I get to Mayja's journal and she reveals that she's pregnant in one lengthy sentence. Punctuation optional. She says that no one knows besides her baby daddy and I don't write anything on her page just yet. I turn to the next page and it's the first journal entry that is a story, maybe real life events disguised as fiction. It is about a girl being molested by her step dad and she tells her mom but her mom doesn't believe her. And the abuse continues and no one will listen. Red flags rise in my head, knowing that this is a journal entry and she's the only one who has created a story that may be representational of her own life. The name at the top of the page was unknown to me, so I pick up the two last pieces of paper and hand them to Mr. Rogan.

"Umm, did the students know that someone else would be reading these?" I ask, beginning to feel like an intruder.

Mr. Rogan shifts a bit, "Well, no I didn't tell them. Why?" He had told me to grade their entries and now I felt as though I had invaded their space. Grading papers for a class of students that I had never actually met besides the few names of students I did recognize who had come into the class during their lunch periods for favors or some peace.

"Because Mayja said that no one knows about her pregnancy.."

"Oh, that's a lie," he interrupts me, "and anyways she had a miscarriage already." He waves his hand and it takes me a few seconds to recover from his lack of sympathy.

"Ok, well look at this one, I don't know if we need to report this or talk to her or something." I hand him the piece about an abusive stepfather. He scans it for a second before putting it back on the desk.

"No, that's fine."

He walked back to his desk while the other students in the class notice what I'm doing and begin to yell, "Don't do his work for him! He's just lazy! Don't do it!" I laugh at them and Mr. Rogan grimaces.

Gripping my blue pen in my hand, in between my thumb and forefinger, adding the permanent calluses on my hand, I read over her page again and write: "Your writing is excellent! I would love to read more of your stuff! This was a really sad story. I hope that when you write the ending the girl goes to a counselor or gets help and realizes that people will believe her. Thanks for sharing."

I turn the pages back into Mr. Rogan and once again I am faced with the shameful inadequacy of the written word.

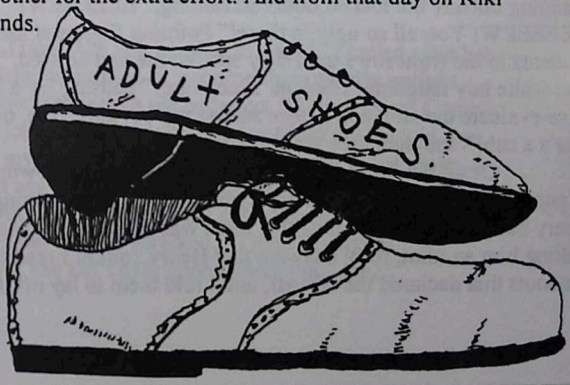
Writing questions on the blackboard and our newest student, Kiki, stares me down.

"I like your shoes," she tells me. Her face lacking in any emotion.

"Really?" I ask her after taking a good look at my men's size 11 gunboats for feet. I look back up at Kiki. She raises her book in front of her face and starts laughing at my expense. The student behind her joins in as well, mocking my stolen shoes. Ouch.

I didn't want to let one insult influence the way I treated Kiki. She'd walk into class, arms crossed over her chest, weary of any sort of authority figure. Mr. Rogan passed out a worksheet and she threw hers on the ground, yelling, "I ain't doing this crap!" Mr. Rogan walked passed her, stepping on the worksheet without even looking at her. She laid her head down on her desk and waited to fall asleep.

I got up from my seat at the front of the classroom, picked her worksheet up from the ground. The sheet was now covered with footprints, patterns from gym shoes. I sat down next to her and asked, "Kiki would you like to do this worksheet with me?" Her face showing apprehension while emitting a shy "Ok." We looked through the book, discussed the questions, making each other laugh and thanking each other for the extra effort. And from that day on Kiki and I were friends.



And oh yes, adolescents can be real assholes too, mind you. Being an asshole isn't just reserved for us adults. Like the substitute that yelled at a student for swearing in front of her, "Girl! How can you talk like that in front of me!? Don't you know how to show respect for your elders?" The substitute sitting at a desk with the *Chicago Sun Times* open, reading the obituaries and the student in front of her was insulted that she had interrupted her conversation. She turned to the sub without attitude, just pure pragmatics, "Just because you're old doesn't mean I gotta respect you. You gotta earn respect."

The substitute furious and pulling out another referral form when the student was just telling the truth. The student sent down to the main office for the first time in her school career, hanging her head in shame on the way down the hallway and the next day she told me, "I ain't ever gonna talk to an old person ever again. They all got issues."

No, being an asshole can apply to all age groups. And with the inconsistent hormones and moodiness, you just got to let it not affect you so much.

Like the time some students walked from class to class, standing outside the locked doors screaming, "EEEEEEW! EEEEEEW! You all so ugly in there!" Pointing fingers at the students in the front rows until they spotted me and howled, "Look at that white boy laughing! Look he's laughing!" pausing for a second to re-evaluate the situation before stating the obvious, "Oh, oh shit that's a sub!" and then they scrambled away.

Or all the times I had to tell Marcus to stop throwing pieces of paper at Tisha. Or how one day some students were making fun of Henry because he didn't know that there was no school the next day. Calling him an idiot, fully unaware that Henry couldn't read the handouts that declared the day off, and I told them to lay off, that I

didn't know that school was cancelled the next day either. Or how Norman constantly screams, "snnaaaaaaake" out in the middle of the class when Mr. Rogan asks students to do their work. I came to see it as endearing and used the phrase during my own time, teaching it to friends and trying to adopt it as my own. But then one day Norman wouldn't stop talking even when I stood right next to him through the entire movie. I told him that others were trying to watch and that he should be quiet so they could watch it.

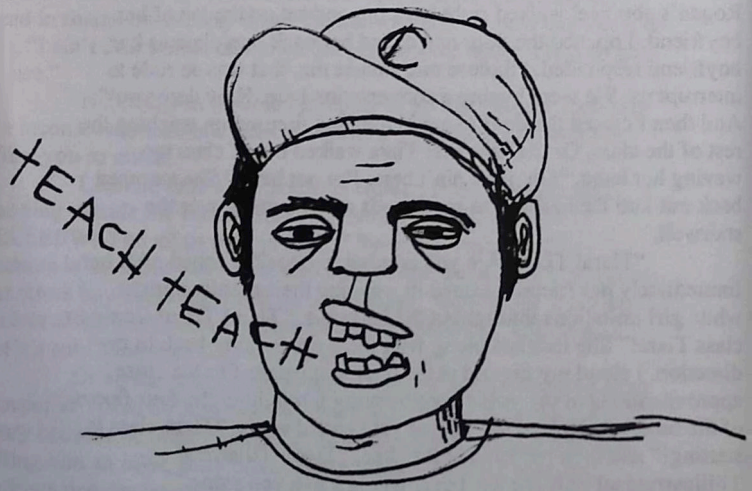
"I don't care about them," he said. And then I called him a snake and his friends around him exclaimed, "Oooooh she got you….she's a snnnaaaaaake."

Or the time that Melissa walked into class, saw Mr. Rogan's absence, walked right back out and sat on the lap of her boyfriend. I opened the door and called her back into class as her boyfriend responded, "Excuse me, excuse me, that was so rude to interrupt us. We were having a conversation here. How dare you!" And then I closed the door to avoid him and focused on teaching the rest of the class. Or the time that Tiara walked out of class too, waving her hand, "Oh, if he ain't here, I'm not here." She stomped back out into the hallway to her friends congregating over the stairwell.

"Tiara! Tiara! Are you coming to class?" I called after her. Immediately her friends chimed in, echoing their nasally uptight white girl imitations throughout the hallways, "Tiara! Tiara! Come to class Tiara!" She laughed along with them not looking back in my direction. I stood my ground at the door and listened to the close approximations of my voice reverberating throughout the four floors of the building. Not giving up just yet I called again, "Tiara class is starting!" and then her friends shrieked, "Tiara! Tiiiarrrra! Tiiiiiaarrraaaa! Shit she ain't ever gonna leave you alone."

Tiara knocked on the classroom door ten minutes later, took her seat and asked for me to repeat the instructions for the worksheet.

These insults, these imitations are all happening for some reason, some form of protection and tools for survival or just general annoyance. It's just my job to not let it get to me, not to take it personally, not let it affect the way I treat the kids, and forcing me to keep on trying to earn their trust.



The word must have gotten around that there was a substitute in Mr. Rogan's class. I would like to think that there is a sly student that walks from class to class poking his or her head in asking, "Where's Mr. Rogan?" a question to which I have had to answer numerous times. But today the fourth period class was packed inside and outside of the classroom. Veteran's day on Monday and then they returned Tuesday riled up from the new rules against wearing coats or hoodies in the schools. Riled up about the new hall sweeps, riled up against the ID system, just plain riled up from too much sugar in the free school lunches or just the residue from it wafting into the classroom from the cafeteria across the hall.

Forty bodies packed into the room, some obviously acting as though they weren't part of the class, others hiding behind books, diligently reading because they knew as soon as the door closed they could have a free day. Sub in Rogan's room, sub in Rogan's room echoing throughout the hallway.

The substitute was a regular fixture within the school. She worked in the main office and was known for not taking any shit. I ruffled through her papers on her desk, trying to find the class roster only to see that the office hadn't given her one or any lesson plans for an entire day. So I start yelling, but yelling in a way that taught me that I am not a very good yeller. Just a friend yell, like, "Hey give me back that sweatshirt." Or "You've still got that dvd?" sounding kind of more of a loud complaint than a yell.

"Who needs a book? And the rest of you start reading?" it should have been a demand and not sounded like a question. But I still didn't have anything planned for Mr. Rogan's unexpected absence. My hands rummaging through the piles of books on the shelves with the sounds of students chatting it up behind me, until it all falls silent and I turn around to see two Chicago city cops standing in the doorway. And all I can think is that I am a horrible, horrible teacher.

Bulletproof vests on, guns visible, still in holsters, smirk on faces until one opens the mouth to say, "All right let's see some ids!" The substitute standing behind the cops after going out in the hallways to call them, taking no shit remarkably looks a lot like criminalizing them. Passing books with the smug cops looking over me and turning around every so often to yell at them in my bad yellers voice, "No no, don't take him away he's in this class!" when they had their hands around Henry's shoulders, guiding him out the door. Students still talking loudly, maybe about cops always coming into the school, maybe about the cop car permanently stationed outside the school doors. The books are in the hands and I am joking with students, checking to see if they are ok after police interrogations and manhandling. They all nod, eyes blank, grim faces.

I told one of my friends this story and she interrupts me, "Wait, how did the cops get there so quickly?" And I must take time to explain that they are there *every* single day. That they are walking around the school, a constant presence, arresting students for infractions occurring during the school day, or coming to haul them away for some other unknown reason. Teachers charging their students with assault for shoving them, and every action is misinterpreted as violence, disrespect and sass.

One of my students, Anita, told me how it is. She summed it all up one day when she was bored of talking about Alaskan oil drilling that she didn't know or care about because it wasn't happening right in front of her face, like all the other injustices she had witnessed. Anita had had it with the school and the police and the metal detectors and being treated like a criminal when all she wanted to do was come to school and learn. She demanded some answers: "Why do we have metal detectors here when they don't have them in the suburbs. And that's where they need them. Because they have the big shootings there. Why do we have to walk through them every day and not them, the rich kids?"

Mr. Rogan scratched his head, "Well, they don't have a problem with violence there."

"No, there's not that much violence here. Yeah there are some trouble makers but most of us ain't like that. And some folks fight, but they get hauled away. I mean people get hauled away here not even for fighting, just for anything. You have more of a chance of getting arrested by coming to school and not doing anything than you do sitting at home and dealing drugs. Now that ain't fair."

And she was absolutely right.

I remember the first time I saw a student of mine get arrested. It was the first day she had made it to class. She sat near the slide projector as I read off Mr. Rogan's slide show about Mark Twain's life. She was smiling and laughing about the old man, and responding to my questions I posed to the class. She started loading her books into her bag and Mr. Rogan called her aside. I heard him mention that the cops were there to talk to her and she looked sad.

"They just want to talk to you, that's all," Mr. Rogan said as he walked her downstairs and I closed up his classroom. I signed out of the front office and walked over to my bike. I turned around and saw that same student being directed into an unmarked cop car, with her hands cuffed behind her back. I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. It was the first and last time I ever saw her.

OK-NOW
KEARN it

"Can you write me a note to the nurse's? I need to take my medication." Ladawn pulled out two orange pill bottles from her bag. "And I need to eat a granola bar or somethin' to take these."

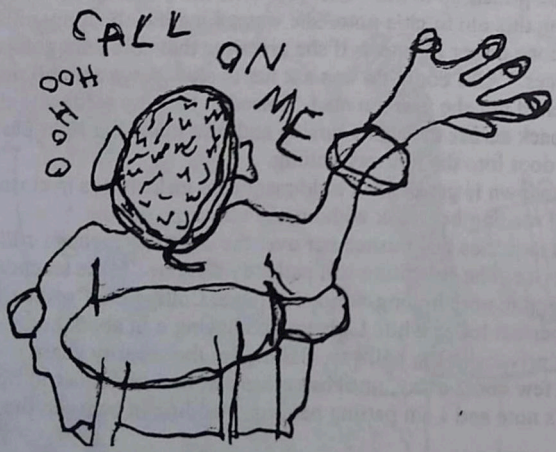
"I can't write you a pass because I'm not a real teacher here, but if you go over to the sub she can write you a pass to the nurse for sure." Ladawn smiled, packed up her belongings and walked over to the substitute sitting at her desk reading the *Sun-Times*. I returned back to the group of boys in the corner of the room. The boys that I could never really get to be quiet because they made me laugh even when being defiant. I liked them and so I couldn't get mad at them and they knew it. I would just go back to their desks and hope my presence was enough to get them to stop talking during the movie. And it was never enough.

But then I heard Ladawn screaming at the sub in the front, "You bitch, I ain't taking your note!" So I quickly walked back to the front and she pulled up to me. "Can you write me a note to the nurse. I ain't taking this old bitch's note. She was asking me about my pills and that's none of her business. If she gives me that note I am gonna rip it to pieces." All I could do was ask her to slow down and tell me what happened but she was too mad. "I need to take my medication!" Stomping back across the room cursing and then marching right past me out the door into the hallway yelling.

Ladawn is generally a mild mannered girl, always in class on time and reading her book without any coercion; but the substitute's inquiries had pushed her over the edge for reasons I still couldn't devise. The substitute still patiently stationed at the teacher's desk, writing the note in long-winded cursive. Dotting the I's, the t's, scrawling perfect loops while Ladawn was having a fit about her invasion of privacy in the hallway. Calling for the security guard stationed a few doors away, until he comes just in time for her to rip up the sub's note and I am patting her arm, standing in between the

two rivals as she is cursing the old lady out and I am telling her to calm down. The sub was following the district wide and school rules but Ladawn wasn't having any of it. The security guard grabbed her arms and she stopped squirming as he led her out of the room.

The sub went back to her desk without any expression on her face, as though this was not worth her time, concern. Enforcing the rule about medication in the nurse's office only, because "they could give their pills to other kids. Who knows they could be using them for new street drugs." A woman who had worked in the school for three years, taking no shit, pushed her glasses back up on the bridge of her nose. Leslie went down to the nurse with the security guard. The kids went back to their movie. And I tried to remember why I decided to become a teacher. Just for a millisecond, of course.



Picture day, picture day. Marching down one by one. Picture day. Picture day, chanting over and over again in my head with feigned excitement as each student descends the stairs with me, groaning; and Robert, he was just moaning. The same moans I heard echoing down the halls a few weeks ago.

"That was you wasn't it? That was you moaning for a half an hour that one day?" I had to ask him. He laughed and ran down the stairs ahead of me, smiling the entire way.

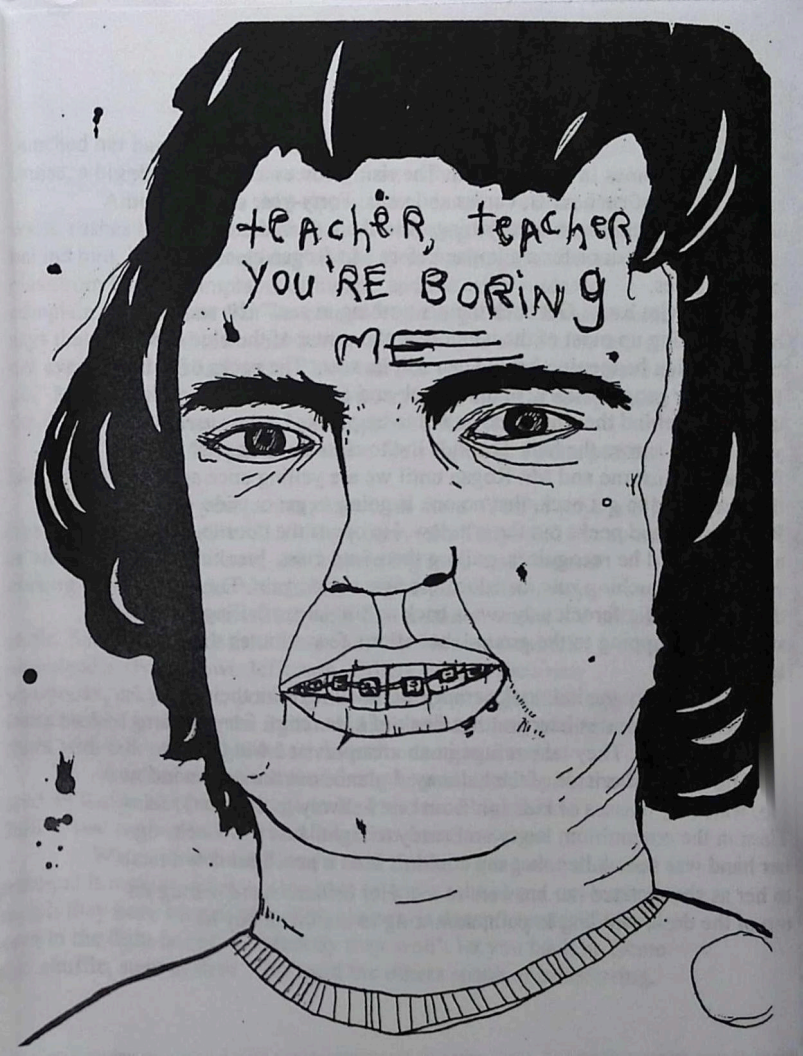
We got into the auditorium and almost every student tried to hide behind the rows of seats, unwilling to get their photo taken for this year's yearbook. The girls became angry that they had not styled their hair ahead of time. Believing that they looked awful, just absolutely awful. Kiki stood behind me, using my adult body as a shield, not wanting to move towards that camera because she thought she looked bad. That everyone would make fun of her for getting a photo taken with the do-rag on her head. She looked down at her feet, twitching on the aged wooden floor. "I can't, Ms. B. I look really ugly today." She wanted a yearbook but so did everyone else. They could only get a copy of last year's yearbook if they braved it all, walked up to the camera on stage and exposed their teeth.

"Kiki, c'mon, you look fine. You get up there and you take your photo. You don't just take it, you get up there and you look fierce. You hear me? Fierce." Kiki listened to my words while still staring at her feet. Her hands beginning to move quickly to adjust parts of her hidden hair.

I proudly watched her take the few steps up to the stage with a nervous smile on her face. And most of the other girls needed encouragement too, but Norman came to school prepared. He was all decked out in an oversized silver suit. A stain prominently displayed on his blue necktie, but still looking classy as hell in his wing tipped leather shoes and puffed out shoulders. And as I said, "Woaaaaah" in response to his appearance he adjusted his tie on command. Of course he had no problems walking up on stage and standing in front of that awful blue sky background. The others begrudgingly complied just to receive a year book to scourge over. To find the photos of people they say are mean and never once deserved to win the coveted title of "best personality." And when Melissa and Tisha both asked me to sign their yearbooks I almost hugged them for bestowing me such a great honor.

Tisha handed me her pen and I stared at her blank page, the coveted space for messages from friends, inside jokes and the occasional asshole drawing an inappropriate picture. But she had wanted my message to be in there too and I gushed, gripping her pen and wrote, "Dear Tisha, You are so smart and talented. You have been an awesome student in class and I know that you will have an amazing future-Ms. B." I handed the yearbook back to Tisha, her eyes immediately reading what I wrote, before she looked back up with such gratitude, eyes beginning to swell, and sweetly said, "Thank you."

I could have not asked for a better day.


teacher, teacher
you're boring
me

It comes in like a swarm. The rising voices and then bodies piling on top of each other, curses and yells. Forty-year old men with walkie talkies unable to do anything. And the kids in the division class rush to the door for a glimpse before Mr. Rogan closes it shut on their faces.

"Get back! Get back there's nothing to see!" His round head covering up most of the window at the center of the blue door; but the action happening behind can still be seen. The packs of kids fighting for gang territory, running back and forth. Girls' hair pulled up tightly behind their heads so as not to be plucked out or used to yank bodies across the hall. The kids in the class pushing pushing forward against me and Mr. Rogan until we are yelling once again that they need to get back, that no one is going to get outside. Mr. Rogan turns and peeks out the window. He opens the door to grab the arm of any kid he recognizes, pulling them into class, breaking the standard no touching rule for educators again and again. The girl with the white hoodie ferociously swats back at him, arms flailing, sweatshirt dropping to the ground, but after a few minutes she is smiling again.

Finally the hall looks empty and the kids take their seats, but then only minutes later another flock of kids return from running away from cops. They take refuge in an unsupervised wing while fighting for another side of the hallway. I glance out the door window too, watching masses of kids run from one hallway to the next, seeing Tiara in the commotion, angry and ready to fight. Just two weeks ago her hand was so swollen that she couldn't hold a pen. I sat down next to her as she dictated her answers to me. Her inflated hand resting on top of the desk, wincing in pain, admitting to me that a boy had

punched her hand. Now I wonder if she will return with a bigger bruise, a bigger hand, another unfortunate story.

A boy with his shirt ripped open, dangling off around his waist, rushes by my door with a loyal following of girls chasing behind him. They are laughing and he is not smiling. Inside the classroom Divine complains of hunger and the other students complain of boredom. But we cannot let them go; the announcement says that the school is on lockdown, that no one is allowed to leave, not even to use the bathroom. "You can pee your pants if you have to go," Mr. Rogan says but the kids pout, try once again to escape out the door and he throws them in the opposite direction.

"But my brother's out there. He's fighting. I gotta protect him," they yell.

"Who are you gonna protect out there? You're tiny, you're like the size of a Keebler Elf," Mr. Rogan tells Tanya and she comes at him with her head down, like a battering ram, laughing and cursing, crawling under his arm pit until he pushes her away.

I put on a movie; I try and find a station on the TV with no static. Some kids poke their heads out the window to watch ambulances flying down Jefferson. Others stick to their new yearbooks, crisp pages, pointing out who they saw get their ugly faces bashed in during the fight. Acting it out and I try to distract them with talk of Top Model trivia and video game codes.

Another announcement from the principal, saying that any student that is 17 (the legal age to let kids leave high school) and failing two classes will not be allowed to come to school on Monday.

We are in the middle of a lock down, a gang war, and the principal is reciting rules, telling kids to leave school and never come back if they have been failing their classes. It doesn't matter if they were in the fight or not, on Monday they won't let you back in. Some kids shuffle, stare at their Nikes and the others speak of transferring.

Uniformed cops walk on by. their radios report that there are firearms in the building. Students get nervous and want to leave the class. They want to see the fight or others just want to go home and not get caught in the way.

An hour passes and we are told to release the students. The kids are moving from one student to the next, gathering as much information about the fight, the gangs, who got beat. The pistol whipping, the blood and if their family members were involved. The commotion from the fight had induced Mayja's pregnancy prematurely and she was rushed to the hospital.

All of these messages relayed from mouth to mouth, kid to kid, back to my ears. I am out in the hallways, calling for kids to return to class, that it's a Friday but we can still do some work. We can finally criticize Mark Twain today and write him a persuasive letter, c'mon let's get to class. Kiki walks up to me looking as though she has seen a ghost, staring at me with blank eyes.

"There's been a fight," she whispers to me as though she were trying to forget it. Standing still gazing at me with apprehension that she didn't know what to do or where to go.

"I know Kiki. Are you ok? Do you need somewhere to go?" was all I can manage to ask her over the voices in the hallway. She clasps her books against her chest, her eyes still focused on my face as though she were unable to do anything else at that moment. Five seconds pass before she slowly walks away like a zombie, leaving my questions unanswered, and hanging in that humid air.

Students file in and Mr. Rogan says he wants them to write about what they are feeling about the fight and how all this violence affects the school. The kids roll their eyes; look at me like I am the stupidest white person alive.

"Yeah it affects the school, it's good for the school. I didn't have to go to third period!" Norman yells. His first sentence that I have heard that hasn't included the word "sssnnnaaaaaaaake."

The kids go on talking as I am searching for pens to give them, supplies that no one, not even the teachers have. Scrambling to get something done today as they keep on chatting and I just tell them to write it down and we'll talk about our thoughts afterwards. They don't care, I mention the word "feelings" and they roll their eyes again.

"Hey this happens a lot, so don't sweat it," they tell me, but I am a little thrown off by it. By the anger in the hallway and the disruption of the day.

Melissa knocks on the door late and I open it for her. Her hair is tied in a French braid behind her head and her sweatshirt is off. She looks bad, real bad, like she may have been in the fight.

"My chest hurts," she declares and I just hand her a card to tell her to write about the fight. "My chest hurts," she repeats before sitting down. I turn back to the class trying to get them working together, trying to do anything, trying to win them back over to me as a teacher. And when I turn around Melissa is bent forward, clutching her chest. Tisha walks over to her and Melissa collapses into her arms. Melissa is shaking, crying, clutching her heart as Tisha holds her on the linoleum floor. Mr. Rogan calls the security guard to get a nurse. Five security guards congregate in the hallway, walkie talkies, near mouth but they tell us not to move her. The class is silent. Melissa is shaking, barely audibly saying she needs the nurse, needs some medicine with tears running down her pink shirt. I pat her back, touch her leg out of comfort, not caring about the no touching rule, feeling panicked at the sight of her in pain on the floor.

The five security guards still in the hallway, staring at her, not letting us move her, not letting us give her water. We have to buy water from a machine because the drinking fountains in the school don't work. I ran to one of the soda machines that line the hallways to buy her a small bottle of water, a vital element not provided to them without a cost or corporate interest. I hold the bottle in my hand, now

shaking a bit, wondering what to do next, wondering when the nurse will come and take care of her.

The principal walks in, "Have you called a nurse?" Yes we called a nurse ten fucking minutes ago, when our student first collapsed on the ground. But the nurse is off tending to the wounds of those in the fight. And we wait and wait as she is shaking, having a panic attack or an ulcer, as security guards are standing around doing nothing, talking to the talkees, asking how old she is."15!" Tisha, Mr. Rogan and I scream. And what does it matter when she is lying incapacitated on the ground. She needs a nurse. "Is she pregnant?" they ask and we just ignore them. Why should her medical history be of concern if she is not even getting medical attention by a professional at this moment?

And then a stranger walks in with a fancy cell phone attachment on her ear.

"Are you the nurse?" I ask and she laughs at me.

"No, I'm the Area Instructional Officer." High heeled and bureaucratic, she looks at the board for the non-existent bell ringer and objective. She notes the absence in her Blackberry before saying "Has someone called the nurse?" Yes, yes we have called the nurse and this student is in pain and the nurse is not here and you, the lady in charge of reporting about this school and its inefficiencies to the superintendent, might use your bureaucratic power to get a nurse up here stat. Maybe in your report you could talk about the lack of adequate resources instead of all the testing "failure" that you business people are so quick to examine, to blame the student and schools rather than the broken system that expands far beyond the walls of this high school.

The nurse enters with a wheelchair finally. The mass of security guards disperse. Would any student from a well funded school be ignored during a medical emergency for 20 minutes? Why

are these kids treated as though they are disposable, that a student collapsed on the floor isn't cause for an ambulance as the other students had suggested. They mocked the principal as he stood in his suit, hands in his pockets, waiting for the only nurse to crawl her way up to the third floor. They looked to us adults, they trusted us to take care of them and we failed.

The class waved goodbye and all I can think about is hiding. I don't want to get up in front and teach a lesson about Huck Finn and ramble on about everything and nothing. That isn't applicable to their daily lives. To Melissa. To the scene they just witnessed in which the school confirmed that they are dispensable and not needing urgent medical care when so many young kids have ulcers already from the stress and worry.

I ask them about the violence. They tell me it's a way of life; that it's fine; that it just happens in the school. That they know at least one family member who has been murdered by a gang or a gun, and that's just the way it is and will always be.

But the fight prevented Melissa from getting help, I say, that didn't do any good.

That hurt her. That's too bad they say. But this fighting, it's not gonna stop. Couldn't this be solved another way I keep on asking. No it's not gonna happen they reply. We got friends; we got families that we gotta protect because we know that the government, the police, no one else is looking out for them but us.

I have no rebuttal, I have no closing statements. They are only fifteen but they know so much more than I do. Class ends, they walk out. The class is empty and I am done for the day, quickly wiping any tears that have accidentally escaped. I start to walk out, avoid signing out of the office because it is packed with screaming mothers looking for their children. The scene continues outside with more moms, sisters, brothers, asking the cops where the kids are and when they will ever get out of jail.

Channel Two News truck out front to film another tragedy, another story to vilify the kids. I shakily mount my bike and ride down the industrial streets caked with broken glass as I see faces poking out from alleyways, patrolling, looking for retaliation or friendly faces. I walk into my house to take off my teacher clothes, fingers fumbling, still a bit numb, and then the news reports that 47 kids arrested that day.

Forty-seven.

Four-tee-seh-ven.

I spent most of the weekend indoors, traumatized from the day before. Unable to put up with going out to shows or bars, feeling incapable to relate, and just shutting myself in to watch the news. Every single broadcast. Hoping not to see any of my students faces or hear their names dragged across the airwaves. Eager not to see their yearbook pictures, that they took just two days before with apprehensive smiles and perfected hairstyles, posted in the newspapers under some tragic headline. I watched the news because I just didn't know what else to do. I had not learned to turn it all off like other seasoned teachers, to continue on with the day and our lives. Thoughts about the kids, thoughts of the school had taken me over.

I understand the need for giving every student access to a violence-free educational environment. And the fight was not fair to those students who were not involved, fearful to return to school, wanting to transfer just to get out of harms way. Kids need to feel some form of safety in the school, from harassment from the other students, but they also must be protected from being targeted by law enforcement officers as well. I am skeptical about the numerous arrests from the fight, wondering how the arrests could be trumped up

because of the criminalization of African-American students. How in the hell could 47 kids be arrested? Though there were weapons involved, I still believe that if possible the students should be able to be disciplined within the school setting without resorting to always calling the cops for the oftentimes unwarranted arrests during every school day. The fight could have been stopped by the administration, by the numerous security guards and punishments handed out within the school rather than calling in the police to arrest 47 students, charging them with criminal battery and mob action. This of course would never happen to a group of white students. The school, the police and the city do a solid job of criminalizing African-American adolescents, of looking at their actions as far more dangerous and far more serious than a high school fight.

Everyday the police are already in the building, patrolling, looking for another excuse to put a kid away. Because it's easier to haul them off to jail than actually care about them and give them an adequate education.

These 15 to 17 year old African-American students are considered adult criminals by the police, by strangers on the street, and fearful el riders. I wonder if Tiara was arrested during the fight, with her tough demeanor she'd be singled out for talking back to authority. But seconds later she'd be smiling at you and asking for help on a worksheet. It is life and death, students being condemned to jail, banned from school, written off with criminal backgrounds and no jobs on the horizon. A problem that society created and perpetuates and to deal with it they lock them up, keep them out of the view of the public so that others won't have to acknowledge the obvious injustices.

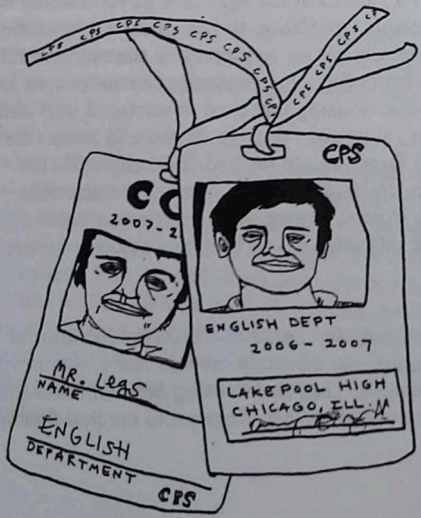
"The white supremacist myth of African Americans as dangerous in the city is realized in the image of educational policies that discipline and regulate black youth. The city's insistence on 'taming' black schools and youth with racially coded basic skills, scripted instruction, probation and reconstitution of schools and military high schools serve to legitimate the segregation and/or dispersal of low-income communities of color. These policies (the flip side of elite high schools) instill order and help make the city 'safe' for new white upscale enclaves—another reflection of the highly racialized moral panic over the city drummed up by dominant media and driving the long march of so much of urban American's black youth into the distant, rural hell of mass incarceration."

— Pauline Lippman

Go and find Lippman's studies of the increased governmental control of public education and its correlation to gentrification (specifically in Chicago). That these schools are neglected by the city and refused adequate resources in order for it to eventually be condemned and shut down like the public housing that used to surround it. A shiny new magnet or charter school will open in its place to attract the upwardly mobiles and their straight teethed children, while the landscape of the city is drastically altered to cater to those with disposable income. So even if you never had a reason to care about public education in the city before, you have no reason to ignore it now.

(Melissa gradually felt better and is on medication for her condition. And Mayja, the one who said she was labor, was never even pregnant to begin with. They had to bring her mom into school and have a psychiatric evaluation. Mr. Rogan told me that that was a crazy day.)

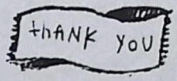
Dayjanequa stared at me with confusion, "You wanna be a teacher of kids, like us?" I laughed and she continued, "That's just crazy" her face twisted in contemplation, "I couldn't handle us, us old ones. I can only deal with the little kids. Because I think I wanna be a kindergarten teacher." I nodded and told her about my kindergarten class just a few months before. How those kids made my mornings, how Julius could never remember my name but he said he was my boyfriend anyways. She got excited thinking about her class, staring at her in the future, attentive to her instruction. "Yeah, for real? You ain't sick of us yet? You really wanna be a teacher of high schoolers like us?" Yes, I love it, I say. She shakes her head at me in disbelief, "Really?" Yes.Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes.



We wait for that first snow that falls to the ground oh so gently. And everyone gets their first glimpse out the window with the same obvious information exiting from our chapped lips. "Snow," we say in disbelief and awe. A newfound respect for the seasons, the welcoming sight that we curse within a few weeks when it has all iced over, turned grey and barren. But for now students strap on their coats and dance underneath the sky as the skyscrapers disappear in the distance, the construction cranes go away, and everything becomes a lot simpler. Just. For. That. Moment.

Still possessing the capability to start a pants-off dance off on a beer soaked floor. My bare feet slipping on the hardwood, falling to the ground like a carpet had been pulled from beneath me. Swimming in the brown and green alcohol waste on the floor; green from the tragically fallen Christmas streamers; brown from the dirt on our feet, and maybe the twelve egged egg nog with cloves mingled into the mix somewhere. Dancing and slipping, bruising, banging, always getting back up until the last fall, with three of us still remaining on the dance floor, the same three who continued the pants off dance off in the summertime. Starting to notice the stains on our legs, shirts and underpants, and the soreness in our muscles. It takes four of us to finally lift Albert up from the ground after yet another fatal fall. And it's all over when I start screaming "I pulled an ass muscle! I pulled an ass muscle!" limping back up off the ground, after my legs split in opposite directions and I may have lost one of my imaginary testicles between my legs. The creeping pain shooting up my thigh as I amble around looking for my pants, unable to find my socks, and eventually abandoning them anyways as a thank you gift to my dear hosts.

The wind howling outside at forty miles an hour. Frost on our cheeks. Empty streets and art canvas treasures. To coming home and still having time to wrestle my roommates. But the tall one can tackle Lucas and I with one hand. He bum rushes us into the bath tub, turns on the scalding hot shower and soaks us fully clothed after we had finally put our pants back on, returning to civilization after so many ass-shaking hours. The water running green, with the streamers soaked into our skin. Screaming and laughing while staring at the hole in the ceiling, the tiles slowly deteriorating, falling onto our heads, into our open mouths and coughed right back out. And realizing that I can still do this. That there is still the time for hope and love and loyal friendships in this world that wants us to have none of it.



I am grateful for all of the time I have spent with my students. I thank them for allowing me into their classrooms, lives, and thank them for educating me. And I hope that next time you hear these stories they'll be directly from my students, and not from my big mouth.

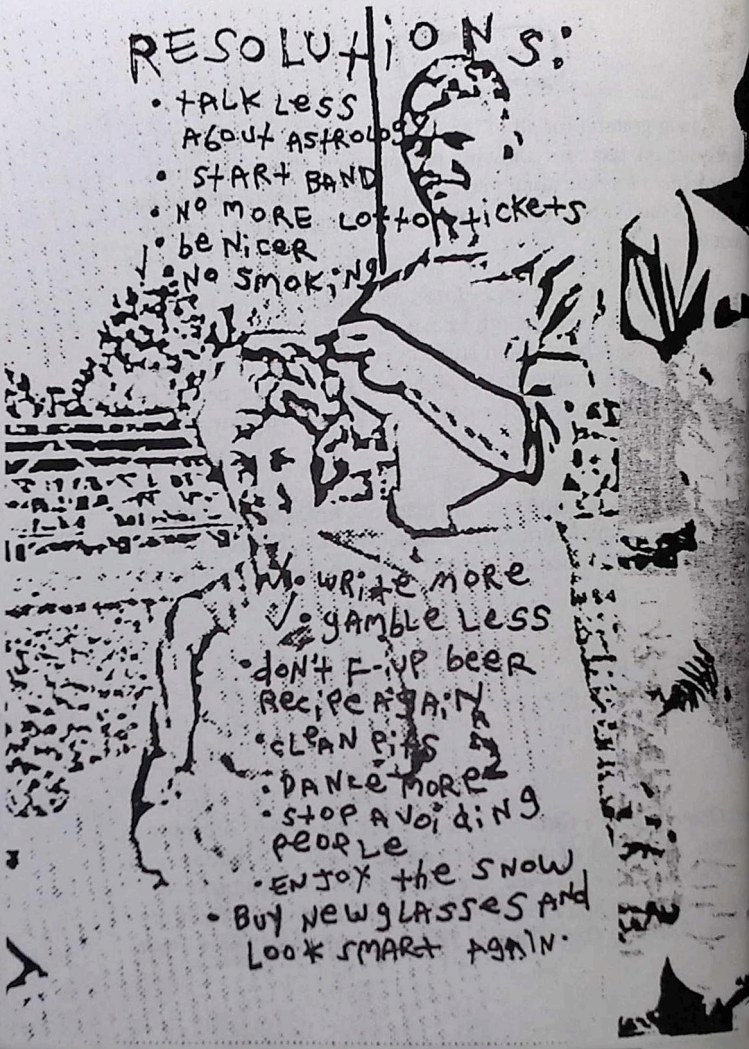
It is my last semester before I am fully certified. I am still nervous, still unsure even though I have already started student teaching at another school. With students who stare at me making a fool out of myself in front of the chalkboard. Indeed. Maybe one of these days I'll get it right, but for now I just gotta keep on trying.

Thanks to my students, my teachers, my schools, financial aid, Lucas, Julie, Jami, Mitra, Suze, Ciara, Melinda, Ranise, teacher's lounge coffee, winter hibernation, mint gum and the Chicago Bears.

Stay warm and be good. ♥, LB

Talk: l[redacted]@hotmail.com .....time: January 2008.

Reads: *Other People's Children*, *Fires in the Bathroom*, *Teaching to Transgress*, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Midnight's Children*, *Always Running*, *Our America: life and death on the Southside of Chicago*, *Discipline and Punish*, *Holler if You Hear Me*, *The Fire Next Time*, *Framing Drop Outs*, *Is This English?*, *Radio Free Dixie*.


RESOLUTIONS:
• TALK LESS ABOUT ASTROLOGY
• START BAND
• NO MORE LOTTO TICKETS
• BE NICER
• NO SMOKING
• WRITE MORE
• GAMBLE LESS
• DON'T F-UP BEER RECIPE AGAIN
• CLEAN PITS
• DANCE MORE
• STOP AVOIDING PEOPLE
• ENJOY THE SNOW
• BUY NEW GLASSES AND LOOK SMART AGAIN.